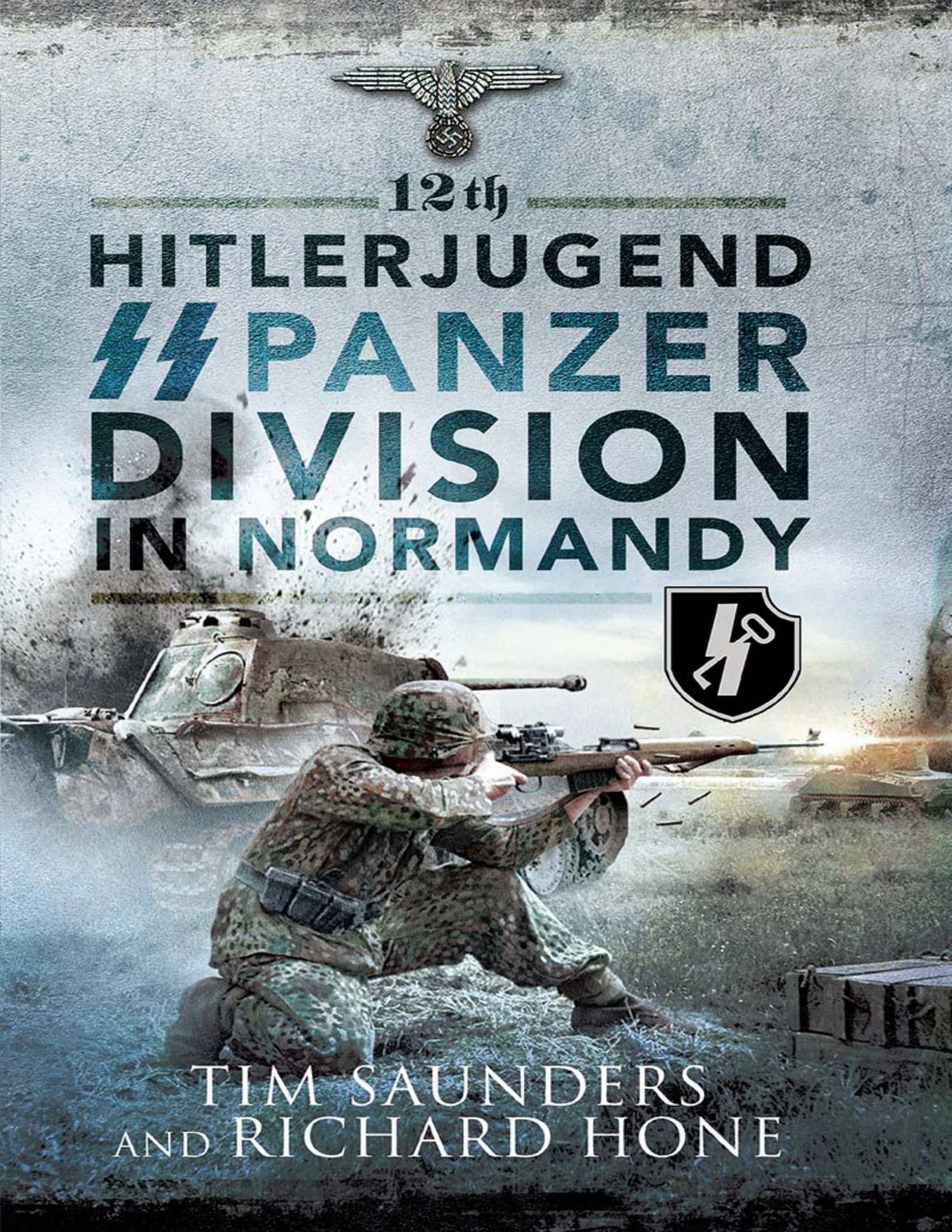

12th
HITLERJUGEND
SS PANZER
DIVISION
IN NORMANDY
TIM SAUNDERS
AND RICHARD HONE

12th *Hitlerjugend*
SS Panzer Division
in Normandy

12th *Hitlerjugend* SS Panzer Division in Normandy

Tim Saunders
&
Richard Hone

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by
PEN & SWORD MILITARY
An imprint of
Pen & Sword Books Ltd
47 Church Street
Barnsley
South Yorkshire
S70 2AS

Copyright © Tim Saunders and Richard Hone, 2021

ISBN 978-1-52675-736-4
ePUB ISBN 978-1-52675-737-1
Mobi ISBN 978-1-52675-738-8

The right of Tim Saunders and Richard Hone to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the Publisher in writing.

Pen & Sword Books Limited incorporates the imprints of Atlas, Archaeology, Aviation, Discovery, Family History, Fiction, History, Maritime, Military, Military Classics, Politics, Select, Transport, True Crime, Air World, Frontline Publishing, Leo Cooper, Remember When, Seaforth Publishing, The Praetorian Press, Wharncliffe Local History, Wharncliffe Transport, Wharncliffe True Crime and White Owl.

For a complete list of Pen & Sword titles please contact
PEN & SWORD BOOKS LIMITED
47 Church Street, Barnsley, South Yorkshire, S70 2AS, England
E-mail: enquiries@pen-and-sword.co.uk
Website: www.pen-and-sword.co.uk

Contents

Introduction
Acknowledgements
1. Raising and Training the Division
2. The Invasion
3. The *Hitlerjugend* in Action
4. Attack and Defence
5. Fighting EPSOM
6. The Battle for Caen
7. Operations South of Caen
8. Operation TOTALIZE
9. Endgame in Normandy
Appendix I: German Recruit Training in 1943
Appendix II: SS Ranks and Allied Equivalents
Notes

Hubert Meyer's memorabilia in front of a photograph of him as a junior officer on duty at Berchtesgaden in the mid-1930s. From the left: German Cross in Gold, Russia medal winter 41/42 ('Order of the Frozen Feet'), Black Wound badge, Iron Cross First Class, *Obersturmbannführer* shoulder boards and cuff titles for both the *Leibstandarte* and the *Hitlerjugend*.

Introduction

The 12th *Hitlerjugend* SS Panzer Division was the Second British and First Canadian armys' most intractable and undoubtedly determined enemy, fighting them throughout the campaign from D+1 to the final breakout from the Falaise Pocket. Many an Allied veteran admitted loathing the *Hitlerjugend*'s 'brutal and fanatical young soldiers', others said that they feared fighting the division's youths who were prepared to sacrifice themselves for their cause, while some, with the benefit of hindsight, voiced a grudging respect for their implacable opponents.

There is very little in English print in any detail on the 12th *Hitlerjugend* SS Panzer Division as a whole, other than the late Hubert Meyers' outstanding history. As 1a (chief of staff) of the division, he and his contributors were primarily relying on memory and allied accounts of their battles and, as he mentioned in the foreword to his history, it was written at a time when there was scant documentary evidence from the division's records available. Since he was writing in the seventies, however, a considerable amount of the missing material has been located in archives, much of it in Eastern Europe. This book makes full use of the newly-available material.

Placing one's self in the boots of a *Hitlerjugend* soldier is to appreciate the range of difficulties and disadvantages that the German's laboured under during the Normandy campaign. The list of these is long, starting with Allied material superiority in virtually every area, which led to the crushing weight of fire power the *Hitlerjugend* had to endure, through to a paucity of food and a lack of relief from the front line. Under these circumstances it is a remarkable fact that the Hitlerjugend remained an effective fighting force even when reduced to a small *kampfgruppe* at the end of the Battle of the Falaise Pocket.

Acknowledgements

Our first thanks must go to Patrick Hinchy for setting up the interview with his father-in-law Hubert Meyer. In granting the authors an interview, the division's chief of staff in Normandy said that he trusted us 'as honourable [former] members of the British Army and that we would not set out to either glorify or vilify the *Hitlerjugend*, in the way so many others have in the past'. In writing this book we stand by our promise to Hubert Meyer and have sought to be thoroughly objective and will not shrink from not only covering the division's undoubted military achievements on the one hand, and fully confronting what are hard and unpleasant facts – readers will of course make their own judgements.

We would like to thank Lieutenant Colonel (Retd) James Porter for his advice on naval bombardment of inland targets, in particular regarding the death of Fritz Witt in the outskirts of Caen on 14 June. On a related subject thanks are due to Major Mike Peters who educated us over the years on the role of air observation post squadrons of the Army and Royal Air Force. It is only placed in German boots that we fully appreciated Hitler's error in fighting within range of naval gunfire and the effect it had on the German soldier.

Maps are an essential element to any military history, and we are grateful to the various archives particularly in the US and Canada that make copies of the maps used during the Normandy campaign freely available. These maps in various scales undoubtedly help with understanding the various actions and are an aid for those who tramp the fields of Normandy today to locate the scene of the fighting described in this volume.

As usual Pen & Sword's team – Heather Williams, Matt Jones, Pamela Covey, Noel Sadler and Tara Moran – have worked hard to turn our

manuscript into a very good looking book and our unreserved thanks are due to them.

Tim Saunders and Richard Hone
Warminster
January 2021

Chapter One

Raising and Training the Division

There was and is, of course, nothing particularly new or unusual about the employment of young soldiers; it has happened in virtually all armies and in all ages. Indeed, Germany had in 1914 raised divisions of pre-conscription-age volunteer youths and students, which were officered by reservists whose service was many years out of date. These hastily 'trained' formations were committed to battle at Ypres in late October where they came up against hard-bitten British regular army soldiers in the fields north of Langemarck and suffered heavy casualties in what became known as the *Kindermort* or 'Massacre of the Innocents'.

Later in the war the 238th Division, for example, was raised in early 1917 at Lockstedt Kasserne north of Hamburg. Young soldiers, conscripts from the 1898 and 1899 class, were provided with a handful of officers and NCOs returning from convalescence. This division was subsequently committed to battle on the Western Front with the majority of its soldiers still only aged between 17 and 19. As we will see, memory of these and other incidents had an impact on the formation of the *Hitlerjugend* Division thirty years later.

By early 1943 the tide of the war was turning against the Third Reich, with the disaster at Stalingrad where *Feldmarschall* Paulus surrendered the remaining 91,000 men of his Sixth Army casting a long shadow over the German war effort. Consequently, the Nazi leadership adopted a total war command economy,[1] with the realization that not only were replacements for losses necessary, but also an expansion of the Wehrmacht to cope with the burgeoning Allied military strength. In addition, there was a need to match Allied war production. The German solution to this was an increased use of

youth service and slave labour based on Albert Speer's industrial genius.

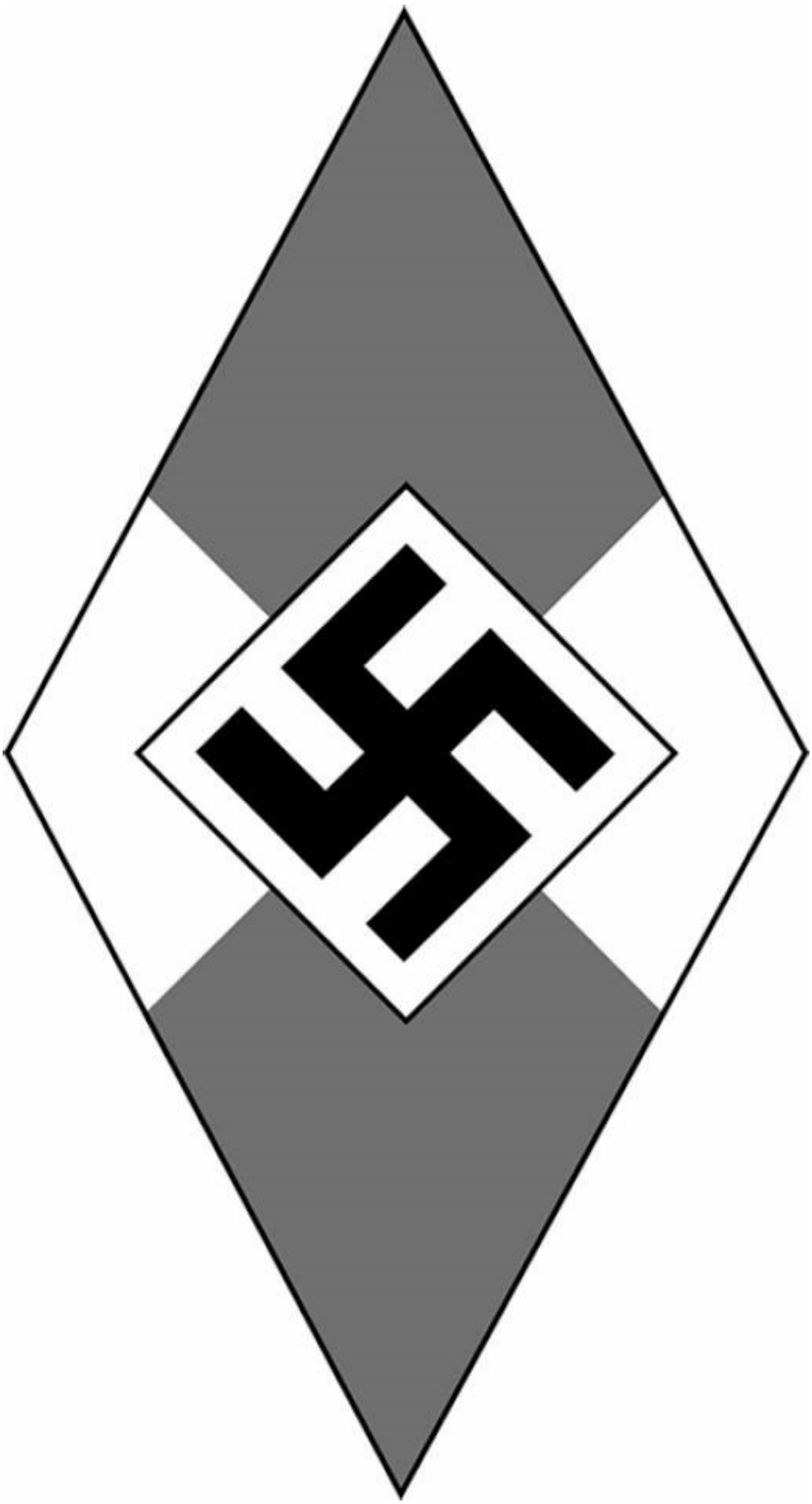
Origins of the *Hitlerjugend* Division

The original idea for the formation of the *Hitlerjugend* Division emanated from SS-*Gruppenführer* Berger, head of the SS Central Office. The idea to create a division of 17-year-olds was quickly taken up for development by *Stabsführer* Mönckel and Artur Axmann of the Reich's Youth Directorate. During the second week of February 1943 Hitler gave his authorization to recruit the division from the *Hitlerjugend* movement. A staff officer wrote:

> I have submitted to the Führer your offer, on behalf of the youths born in 1926, to form a division of volunteers for the Waffen-SS, and of the same value as the *Leibstandarte*. I have also informed him of your desire and request that this division be identified in a manner which would clearly emphasize its origins and its simultaneous membership in the *HJ*. The Führer was highly pleased and has directed me to convey to you that you should immediately begin the recruiting of volunteers.[2]

The *Hitlerjugend* (*HJ*) from which the volunteers for the division would be drawn came into existence in 1922 alongside the National Socialist movement and by 1926 was formally a part of the Nazi Party structure with the title of Hitler Youth, League of German Worker Youth. As the Nazi Party expanded, so did the *HJ*, along with junior and girls' equivalents.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, a family's membership of the party and the *HJ* for their children became an increasingly important feature of life in the totalitarian state, especially if one sought advancement. In 1936, as the Nazi grip on the state tightened, with its membership standing at 5 million, all Aryan youths were required to join the *HJ* and in 1939, with war clouds rising, service in the organization became compulsory for all Germans on their 14th birthday.



The badge of the *Hitlerjugend* youth movement.

The *Deutsches Jungvolk* and the *Hitlerjugend* with its compulsory membership for 10- to 18-year-olds was always both political and military in nature and aims. It was a preparation for military service based on fostering a group identity and physical fitness but also focusing on political indoctrination, self-sacrifice to the party and nation. Before the war a Western reporter commenting on the results of the way German youth was being politically exploited wrote: 'These boys frighten me, much more so than their adult counterparts.'

The militaristic aspects were a considerable advantage to the Wehrmacht as a whole and to the formation of the new SS division. Boys from the age of 10 were not only indoctrinated, with many expressing a wish to die for their country, but had taken part in field day/games based on military skills, toughening up and obedience. Older members of the *Hitlerjugend* continued physical development through sport and activities designed to toughen them up and, finally, there was weapon and tactical training. A US intelligence officer pointed out that 'The Hitler Youth is not a Boy Scout or Girl Guide organization. It is in no respect comparable to any organization for young people known to the Western World.'[3]

To raise a division's worth of young men and to train and equip them against a background of Soviet offensives and further disasters such as 'Tunisgrad' in North Africa, where the last 250,000 Axis soldiers surrendered, was always going to be difficult, not least because the Waffen-SS and no lesser person than General Heinz Guderian would rather have replacements for existing divisions than raise a formation with a distinct political aim.[4] The *HJ* Division's formation would, however, be conducted in phases with the recruitment target being 30,000 youths, from which the 20,000 for the division would be selected. The replacements required for the wider Waffen-SS was a further 35,000.

Hitlerjugend youths training on the K98 Mauser rifle during early 1943.

Many recruits reported for duty in their *Hitlerjugend* uniforms and began their training in them.

To assist in reaching the target of 30,000, boys born in early 1926 were exempt from National Labour Service, with the first 2,000 being released in April and ordered to report to one of twenty Nazi establishments for six weeks of premilitary training at *Wehrertüchtigungslager der Hitlerjugend* (*Hitlerjugend* Military Instruction Camps) or WEL.[5] They were to be followed by a further 6,000 a month later. This training was to take place at camps such as the one at Vogelsang in the Eifel region on the border with Belgium, which was turned over from educating the children of the Nazi elite to pre-military training. One commentator wrote of the WEL training, which

> proved to be a successful innovation in terms of meeting what the Nazis felt to be necessary psychological conditioning for military combat. In a way, they were ideologically-charged basic training camps, less pragmatic, technical, and brutal than such camps for older draftees usually are, but more effective in fostering the attitudes that make military service more than a tolerable endurance test.[6]

The Waffen-SS: The Fighting SS

When Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in 1933, Sepp Dietrich, his longtime political supporter and early member of his personal *Schutzstaffel* or 'Protection Squad' during the turbulent early days of National Socialism in Munich, raised *Sonderkommando* Berlin. The first 120 men selected from the complex ranks nationwide of the SS quickly swelled to 800 and the title was changed through several iterations to *Leibstandarte* SS Adolf Hitler to reflect the dual role of Nazi ceremonial and the protection of the Führer; they were in essence his paramilitary lifeguard regiment.

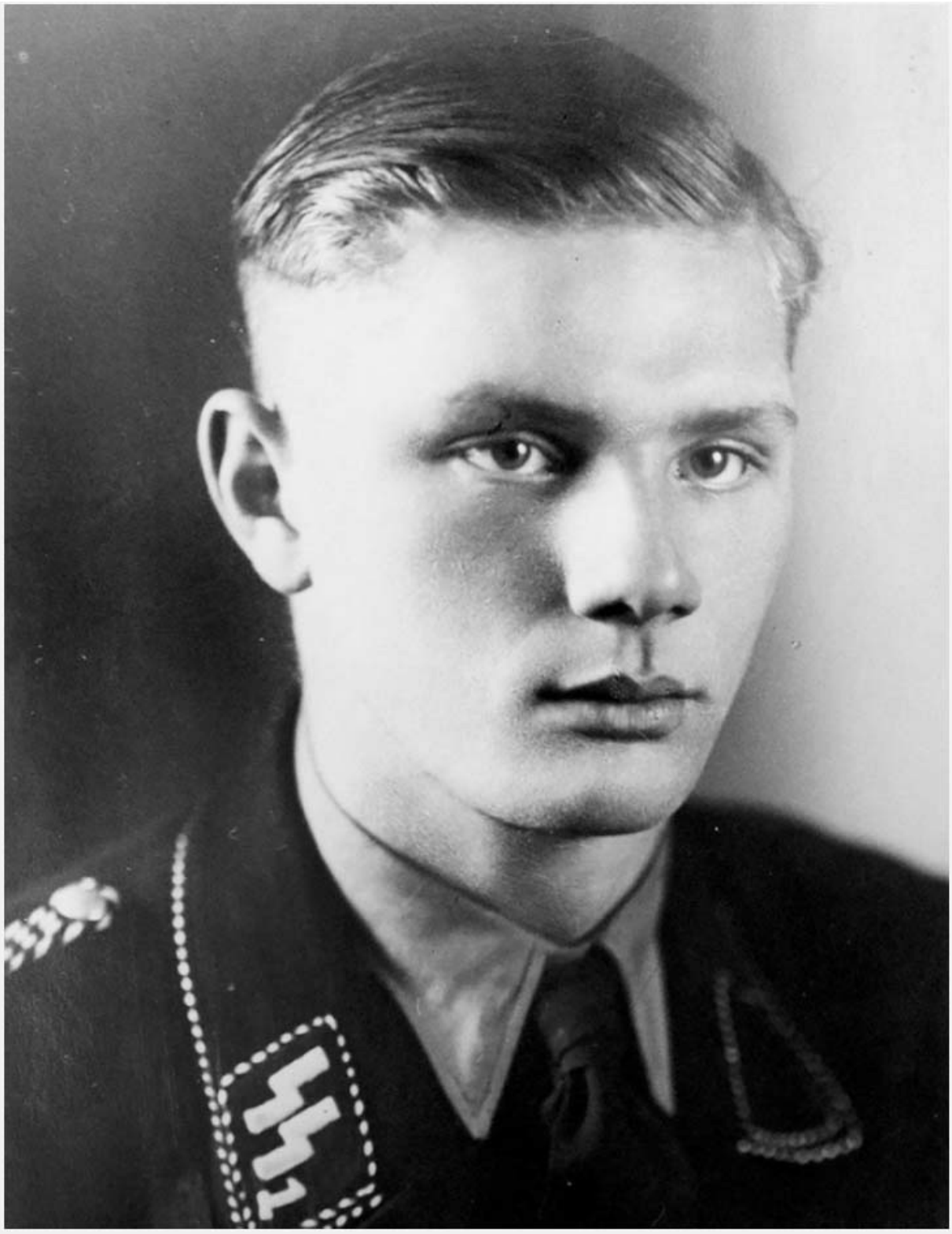
In September 1934, the Führer ordered the formation of a wider Nazi paramilitary force, the SS-*Verfügungstruppe* (SS-*VT*). Three regiments, the *Leibstandarte*, *Deutschland* and the *Germania standarten*, were political enforcers for internal security under Hitler's direct command. A fourth *standarte*, *Der Führer*, was raised in Austria following the Anschluss. The SS-*VT* were disliked by the army and derided as '*Asphaldtsoldaten*' or 'tarmac soldiers' for their ceremonial role. They were trained and equipped by the army as the lowest priority.

During the campaign in Poland in 1939, Hitler ordered the *Deutschland*, *Germania* and *Der Führer standarten* to be expanded to full divisions known as SS-*Verfügungs-Divisions*. Through this measure the SS-*VT* became the Waffen-SS. The *Leibstandarte* had, however, remained a *standarte* but with the addition of support companies it became a fully motorized infantry regiment. In addition, two new Waffen-SS divisions

were raised: the *Totenkopf* Division was formed from concentration camp guards and other SS organizations, while the *Polizei* Division was formed from the ranks of the police. Thus, by the time of the 1940 campaign in the West, what had become the Waffen SS had increased in strength from 18,000 to nearly 100,000 men.

Hitler's 50th birthday parade in Berlin. Note that the *Leibstandarte*'s soldiers are still wearing the M1918 helmet.

The Waffen-SS's commitment in battle, their resulting success and political reliability led to continued expansion, particularly in 1943. The 12th SS *Hitlerjugend* Panzer Division numbered among these divisions. The strict Aryan entry rules of the 1930s were, perforce, swept aside as Germany needed soldiers and the 'elite' nature of the SS was progressively watered down. By 1944 divisions were being recruited in the Germanoccupied territories but were in many cases of little combat effectiveness. In total some thirty-eight SS divisions were formed.



A soldier of the SS-*VT Standarte Deutschland* during the 1930s.

In 1943 the expansion of the Waffen-SS was sufficient to warrant the formation of a corps. Sepp Dietrich, formerly of the *Leibstandarte,* took command and the corps was

promptly sent to northern Italy to help with the disarmament of the Italian army and fight the increasing number of partisans. In April 1944, the corps was redeployed to France, with its headquarters west of Paris, with the *Leibstandarte*, *Hitlerjugend*, *Panzer-Lehr* (*Heer*) and the 17th SS *Götz von Berlichingen* Panzer divisions under command. The corps formed a part of General Schweppenburg's Panzer Group West. The other SS Panzer corps that fought in Normandy alongside Dietrich's men was *Obergruppenführer* Hausser's II Panzer Corps.

The *Leibstandarte* being inspected by Hitler. Note they still have the G-98 rifle and 1918 helmet.

Leibstandarte vehicles and soldiers on the mountain roads of Greece in 1941.

Meanwhile, officers and NCOs were being found for the division as a result of a *Führerbefehl*. The core of the division was to be found by the 1st SS *Leibstandarte* Panzer Division, which would supply a cadre of officers and NCOs but in addition the Wehrmacht was to provide 400 youth leaders as officers and 2,500 *HJ* adult leaders to make up half the 4,000 NCOs required.[7] To aid the process of finding junior NCOs, some 2,000 youths were selected for special training before going to Waffen-SS NCO schools.

Those officers and NCOs who came from the *Leibstandarte* continued to wear their 'Adolf Hitler' cuff title until the division received its own having proved itself in Normandy.

The Division Forms

Standartenführer Fritz Witt, commander of the *Leibstandarte*'s 1st SS *Panzer-grenadier* Regiment, was nominated to form the division and was subsequently promoted to SS *Brigadeführer*. He took with him a selection of officers and NCOs from his regiment, along with those from the *Sturmgeschütz* battalion and artillery regiment, plus other specialists from across the *Leibstandarte*. This cadre was of high-quality soldiers, deeply imbued with the values of National Socialism but marked by their experience of four years of war, particularly the brutality of the Eastern Front. The *Führerbefehl* giving life to the division read: 'By order of the Führer, the immediate formation of the SS-*Panzergrenadier*-Division "*Hitlerjugend*" is to begin at Beverloo.' Thus it was that the division started to form in the area centred on an old Belgian army training area on the heathland between Turnhout and the Dutch-Belgian border, with the first draft of 8,000 volunteers beginning to report for duty.

An officer who was to be a key member of the headquarters throughout the division's existence joined at this juncture. *Sturmbannführer* Hubert Meyer had been sent from commanding a battalion of the *Leibstandarte* to the War College, from which he graduated as Fritz Witt's 1a or chief of staff. He was, however, to be the only trained staff officer in the new division's headquarters.

Even though some of the young volunteers were deferred a few months to finish academic or vocational education, finding the first 8,000 recruits was relatively easy, but in competition with other major Wehrmacht and SS recruiting drives, completing the division was not a straightforward matter. For instance, in Dillingen, a town in the Saar region with 185 *HJ* youths in the right age group, only thirty volunteered. When pressurized, parents would, for example, prefer to send their sons to nearby anti-aircraft units where they were barely at a greater risk than at home or in an air-raid shelter. This trend was particularly marked in the more religious areas of southern Germany.

The main reason for this reluctance was, however, the growing number of casualties on the Eastern Front, bringing to mind the sacrifice of the student formations of 1914, the 'Langemarck Heroes', that had been exploited by

Nazi propaganda in the thirties. It is widely believed that active recruiting in the youth movement reawakened memories of the *Kindermort*, which contributed to parents being unwilling to release their young men to the SS. Consequently, mothers in particular had to be increasingly pressured into releasing their sons to ‘volunteer’ to join the *Hitlerjugend* Division. In some cases, towns compulsorily enlisted boys of the qualifying age to meet the SS targets!

Brigadeführer Fritz Witt.

Sturmbannführer Hubert Meyer.

As a result of parental reluctance, to help persuade and cajole parents a tacit understanding developed that there would be no repeat of the 1914 *Kindermort*. In other words, the young soldiers would be of age and properly trained and equipped before being committed to battle. In addition, as the *HJ* was to be 'of the same value as the *Leibstandarte*', this was to be no hastily assembled ersatz formation: they would have a whole year from formation on 1 June 1943 before being declared operational on 1 June a year later.

The SS were only able to provide a cadre of officers and senior NCOs to Fritz Witt; consequently half the division's junior NCOs would be found from among the volunteers, who were sent to the SS NCO school at Lauenburg. They graduated at the end of October; however, there were still many large manning gaps, which had been partly filled by fifty army officers. Consequently, some of the division's officers and senior NCOs had to be found from among the best-educated, most capable and suitable of the *HJ* recruits. These young soldiers found themselves as officer cadets or potential senior NCOs at a variety of SS and *HJ* establishments in western Germany, which were hastily converted to military academies in order to provide the junior leadership for the division and other SS formations.[8]

While the Beverloo training area was the centre of activity, used mainly by the *Panzergrenadier* regiments, the division covered some 50 square miles, with its headquarters in Oud-Turnhout along with 12th *Panzeraufklärungs* [Reconnaissance] *Abteilung* who trained on the nearby Zwaneven heath. The division was spread out not only for the accommodation and training areas, but also for dispersal due to the increasing threat of Allied air power, particularly long-range fighter-bombers, which could range across northern France and Belgium. *Sturmbannführer* Bremer's *Panzeraufklärungs Abteilung*, for instance, conscripted local Belgians to help dig trenches and scrapes for his armoured cars and half-tracks on the De Liereman heath.[9]

The *HJ* formed a panzer regiment consisting of two battalions, one each of Panthers and Panzer IV and was again built around a cadre from the *Leibstandarte* under *Sturmbannführer* Max Wünsche.[10] Following selection, basic and initial crew training, elements of the regiment moved to the former

French army armoured training area at Mailly-le-Camp, some 250 miles from the rest of the division.

A squad of *HJ* soldiers on the march led by an army officer (with pipe) whose uniform concession to being alongside the SS was the camouflage smock.

Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler, in an address to a selection of the division during its formation, set the tone by saying:

> In these weeks, when the sacrifice of Stalingrad was on everyone's mind, when the Russians mounted massive attacks, your Youth Leader made the decision to offer to the Führer the best young boys of the new class for a new Waffen-SS division. The Führer agreed happily … After a few months in SS barracks you will enter a great formation … You will then train further, shed many drops of sweat in order to save drops of blood and finally you will march alongside your sister division, the

Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler. You will carry the name that the Führer gave you: SS *Panzergrenadier* Division *Hitlerjugend*.

Training

The training regime established by Witt concentrated on 'Priority 1: Physical fitness; Priority 2: Character development; and Priority 3: Weapons and combat training.' The *HJ* made much of their special training scheme but, in reality, it reflected General Guderian's instructions, issued as Inspector of Panzer Troops, to the whole of the *Panzerwaffe* training organization. The documents relating to training can be found in Appendix I.

The streamlined training focused on combat essentials and was a part of his attempt to quickly rebuild the panzer arm after *Unternehmen ZITADELLE* (Operation CITADEL), the Battle of Kursk, in time for operations in 1944. Recruits would be taught to fight; gone was excessive drill and lectures and in came training with live ammunition and night exercises. The only substantive differences between Guderian and Witt's schemes were the compromises necessary for the youth and strength of the young troopers and, of course, SS political education. *Standartenführer* Kurt 'Panzer' Meyer, commander of the 25th *Panzer-grenadier* Regiment, wrote:

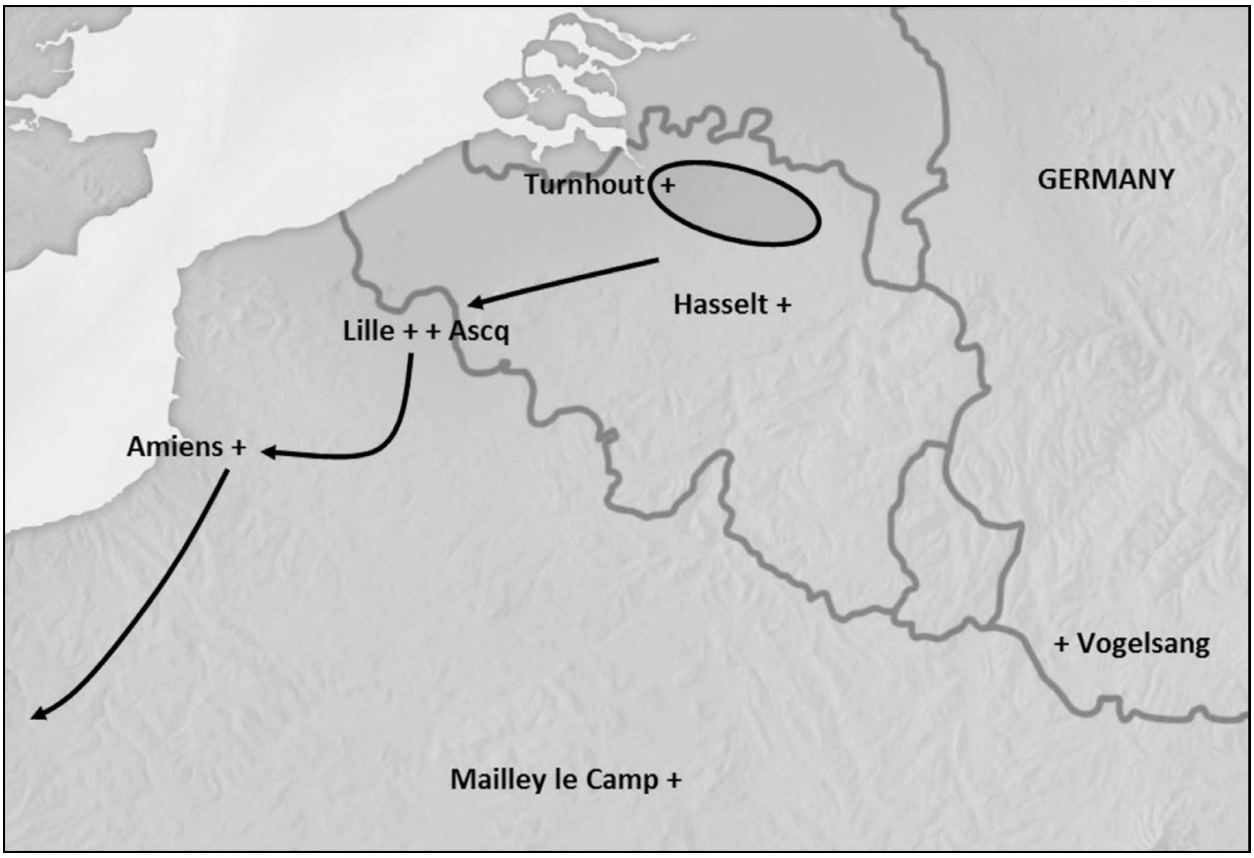
> During their training, drill and ceremonies were avoided. Everything focused on combat training and this took place under the most realistic battle conditions possible. Physical toughening was achieved through sport; forced marches were disapproved of and considered unnecessary and harmful. Based on input from *General der Panzertruppen* Geyr von Schweppenburg, advanced techniques of marksmanship were developed. These took place exclusively in the field. There were no marksmanship exercises conducted on traditional garrison ranges.[11]

While the division's combat shooting training package for infantry did not find favour with that arm's battle school, the development of Guderian's principles impressed him to such an extent that he ordered the scheme to be adopted across the *Panzerwaffe*.

The style of delivery of training was also markedly different. Rather than stand back and tell recruits what to do and how to do it, the experienced SS

NCOs took part in the field exercises, leading and training their men by example. Kurt Meyer oversaw training of his regiment:

> There was no obvious superior-subordinate relationship recognizing only orders and unconditional obedience. The relationship between officers, non-commissioned officers and other ranks was that between those who were older and a little more experienced and those who were new. The officers' authority existed in the fact that they were role models and mentors to the young soldiers. They strove to emulate the close relationship of a family inasmuch as that was possible in the circumstances of the war.



The *Hitlerjugend* training base and eventual route to Normandy.

Another aspect of training was further indoctrination of Nazi ideology in the young recruits, which focused on sacrifice, commitment and the elitism of the Waffen-SS. This would be a continuing theme as, in common with the rest of the Wehrmacht, the division had a *Nationalsozialistischer Führungsoffizier*

(NSFO or Nazi Guidance Officer) who held the appointment of Abt. VI on the divisional staff. These officers were introduced as a result of a crisis in commitment and motivation during the second year of the war on the Eastern Front. They prepared indoctrination materials for use whenever the opportunity presented itself to maintain belief in and commitment to the cause.

A significant difference in the division's daily regime during training was that those who had yet to reach the age of 18 were not issued cigarettes and beer but given rations of chocolate and cocoa if they were available or chocolate milk in lieu. This led to both the Germans and Allies referring to the *HJ* as the 'Baby milk division'. Such was the state of food supply in Germany in 1943 that the extra rations required for often under-nourished trainees were on occasions not available. This was of concern to the divisional staff as many of the young soldiers, despite requirements that they were to be at least 170cm tall for the grenadiers and 168cm for other arms, were still growing and undertaking physically demanding training.

In January 1944 the 12th SS Panzer Regiment left Mailly-le-Camp and joined the rest of the division on the Hasselt training area, where together they took part in live firing exercises that built up to divisional level.

Equipment

It is often assumed that the Waffen-SS took priority for weapons and equipment, but against the background of expansion and the loss of equipment at 'Tunisgrad' and particularly panzers at Kursk, this was far from the case. In theory the SS factories, such as the one attached to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, should have been able to supply clothing, but while they had the labour, the supply of raw materials to them and other producers was often lacking. Despite *Führerweisung* (Führer Directive) 51, which specifically mentions the *HJ* and 21st Panzer Divisions as the priority for equipment for the defence of the West, the reality of the situation meant that weapons and equipment only arrived slowly.

However, the Italian surrender in September 1943, which further stretched Germany's resources, had one beneficial effect for the *HJ*. *Obersturmbannführer* Max Wünsche, commander of the division's panzer

regiment, was tipped off that there were Italian depots full of military clothing now in German hands. He travelled to Italy to seize anything useful for the division, which included dark brown leather submariners' uniforms, ideal for his panzer crews. Also travelling north to Beverloo were whole bolts of Italian camouflage material, which was made up in the standard pattern into combat uniform, normally for officers and senior NCOs. Due to the numerous shortages of clothing items, the best that the division could manage was that units were clad in approximately the same uniform. It is worthy of note that when the *HJ* were committed to battle, only the III/Battalion of the 26th SS *Panzergrenadiers* wore the new *Erbsenmuster* Pattern 44 camouflage uniform, which is often referred to as 'pea pattern' or 'dot 44'.

Men of the 1st Battalion SS Panzer Regiment 12 during a break in training. The panzer crewmen are wearing dark brown leather Italian submariners' suits.

On formation the *HJ* was to be a *Panzergrenadier* Division; consequently they had no panzers and little armour with which to train, as in the aftermath of Kursk the priority for production was those formations fighting at the front. When the division was upgraded to be a panzer division during October

1943, Hubert Meyer recorded that four panzers were ‘procured’ from Russia for training.[12] A selection of guns was obtained in the same way for the artillery regiment. It wasn’t, however, just tanks, guns and other fighting vehicles that the division was short of but all types of vehicles and equipment. Captured Italian transport, some of which had negligible cross-country mobility, was issued in lieu of German vehicles on the establishment.[13] Vehicles were just one of the persistent shortages that plagued the division up to the time of its deployment into battle and beyond, but a command post and map exercise near Dieppe in the spring of 1944 revealed the inadequacy of the mixed fleet of transport and German vehicles started to arrive to replace some of the Italian vehicles.

A representation of a soldier in fighting order clad in the 1944 *Erbsenmuster* uniform.

SS soldier wearing the oak leaf pattern camouflage smock which had been on issue to SS troops since before the war.

Germany's lack of fuel from 1943 onwards not only had an impact on the fighting at the front but also on the training of the *Hitlerjugend* division. According to *Untersturmführer* Kugle, adjutant of the armoured infantry battalion (III/26 SS *Panzergrenadiers*):

> The greatest lack during training was in fuel for the vehicles. There was barely enough for the dispatch riders. Only seldom could the SPWs [Hanomag armoured half-tracks] be driven and such an occasion was looked upon as a holiday by all. Mostly, one SPW would be fuelled up and it would be used in training drives by all groups.

As spring approached, the tempo of Allied operations in Belgium to support the resistance noticeably increased. This became a distraction, but the *HJ* were beginning to look and feel, despite some significant deficiencies in key manpower and equipment, like a proper fighting division. When their sister division the *Leibstandarte* was withdrawn from the East to refit following the Soviet winter offensive, the division, nearing operational readiness, deployed to France. Eventually, the final surplus manpower of 2,000 young soldiers was transferred to the *Leibstandarte*.

Massacre at Ascq

Rail movement in northern France by the end of March 1944 was not to be undertaken lightly. Allied fighter-bombers were ranging across the country in even greater numbers and the SOE was promoting attacks to stifle German military movement to the invasion area. Consequently, it was not a case of simply loading trains to capacity and heading west but planning to defend them from air and ground attack.

Obersturmführer Walter Hauck commanded a company in the Reconnaissance Battalion and was the officer in charge of a train loaded with men and vehicles from various companies. To protect them from air attack five of the division's anti-aircraft guns were mounted on flat cars, all the commanders' machine guns on the armoured cars and half-tracks were

manned and the troops detailed for specific ground defence tasks if attacked. The front five cars carried no troops, only vehicles in case of demolition of the railway and subsequent derailment. These measures were very necessary as on 1 April there were no fewer than twelve attacks by the FARMER and MUSICIAN SOE-Resistance networks on the railway in the Lille-Douai area just inside northern France.

On the evening of 2 April 1944, Hauck's train had halted near the Belgian border before heading towards Lille at 2330 hours. As they approached the city there was an explosion as the engine passed a set of points at Ascq. As the train was only moving at 15mph the engine was stopped safely and only the third and fourth flat cars were derailed. This was not a catastrophic derailment so often seen in footage of other resistance operations and no Germans were injured.

Obersturmführer Walter Hauck.

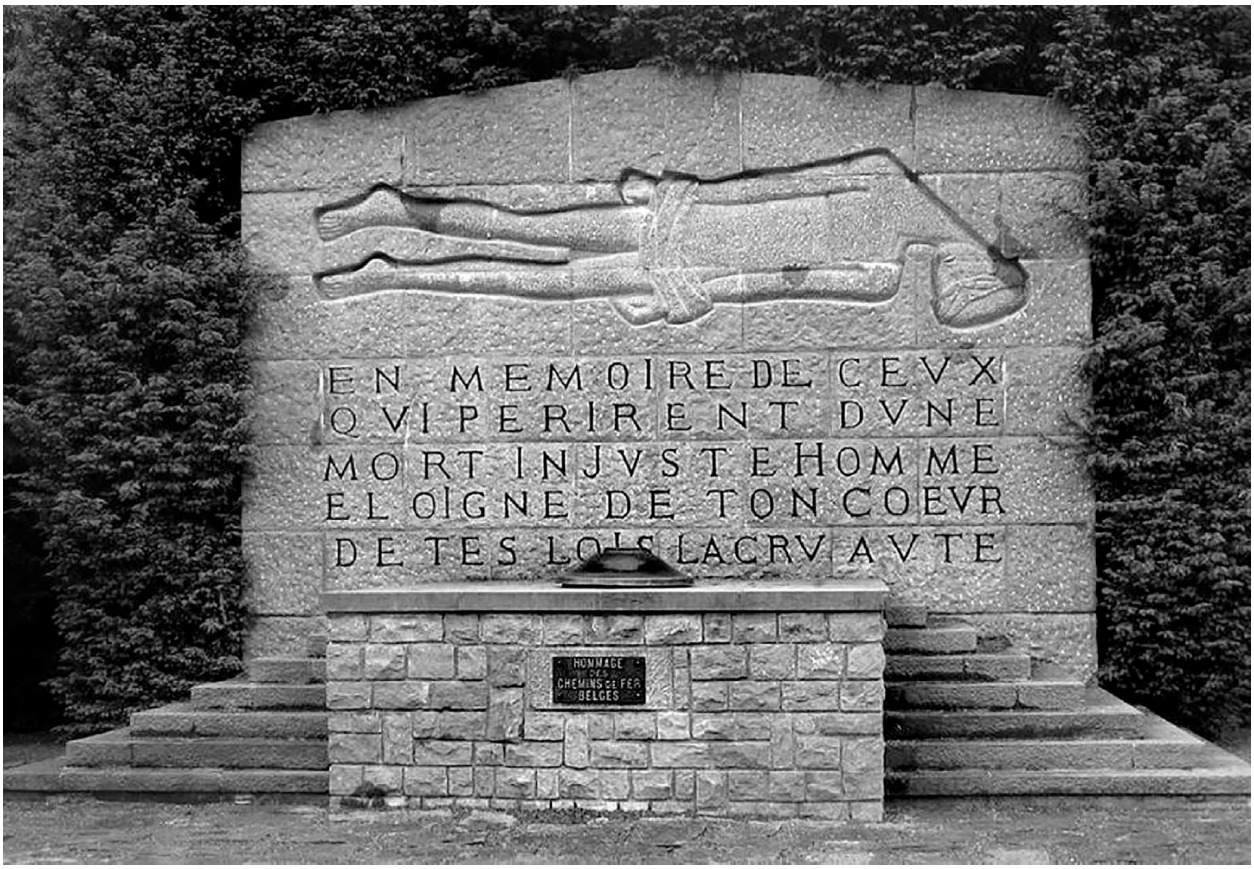
The young SS troopers detrained and took up positions as ordered and the first Frenchmen on the scene recalled that they were all rather matter of fact, but this changed when the angry Hauck appeared and took charge. According to witness statements at his trial he ordered all local men between 17 and 50 years old to be rounded up and brought to the level crossing along with anyone acting suspiciously and he was heard to shout ‘Shoot them all’.

The *HJ* soldiers led by their senior NCOs set off and it wasn’t long before rifle shots were heard by the station master who was reporting the incident by telephone. Hauck arrived in the station and started to punch and kick Monsieur Carré and another railway worker. As he left, he ordered the two to be shot but the fire was inaccurate and Carré was only wounded.

Meanwhile, at the level crossing those rounded up were being hit as they arrived and it wasn’t long before men were being executed a short distance down the line by the traditional shot in the back of the neck. Eleven men who tried to escape were shot down. In all that night in the village and by the railway eighty-six men including Ascq’s priests were summarily executed or beaten to death.

The cost to the French people of Ascq was regarded as disproportionate to what was achieved by blowing the line: just a few hours delay before the well-rehearsed repairs were made. As a result, the SOE organizers were unpopular, which could account for the six resistance fighters who had laid this and other demolition charges being betrayed to the Gestapo and executed.

Those SS soldiers ultimately found guilty of the war crime in person or in absentia, along with Hauck, ultimately escaped the hangman’s noose.



The memorial to the massacre at Ascq.

It is clear from this incident that former *Leibstandarte* members, brutalized by their political origins but above all by the nature of the fighting on the Eastern Front, set an example that young *HJ* soldiers schooled in 'absolute obedience' would follow 'as the way things were'. Events at Ascq, of course, foreshadow the no-holds-barred battle that developed with the Canadians around Caen.

Deployment

Travelling to Normandy ahead of the division to establish the new divisional headquarters, *Sturmbannführer* Hubert Meyer was surprised to find that *Feldmarschall* Rommel did not intend the *HJ* to simply replace the 10th Frundsberg SS Panzer Division which had been rushed to the east, but to position them near the coast. *Sturmbannführer* Meyer recalled:

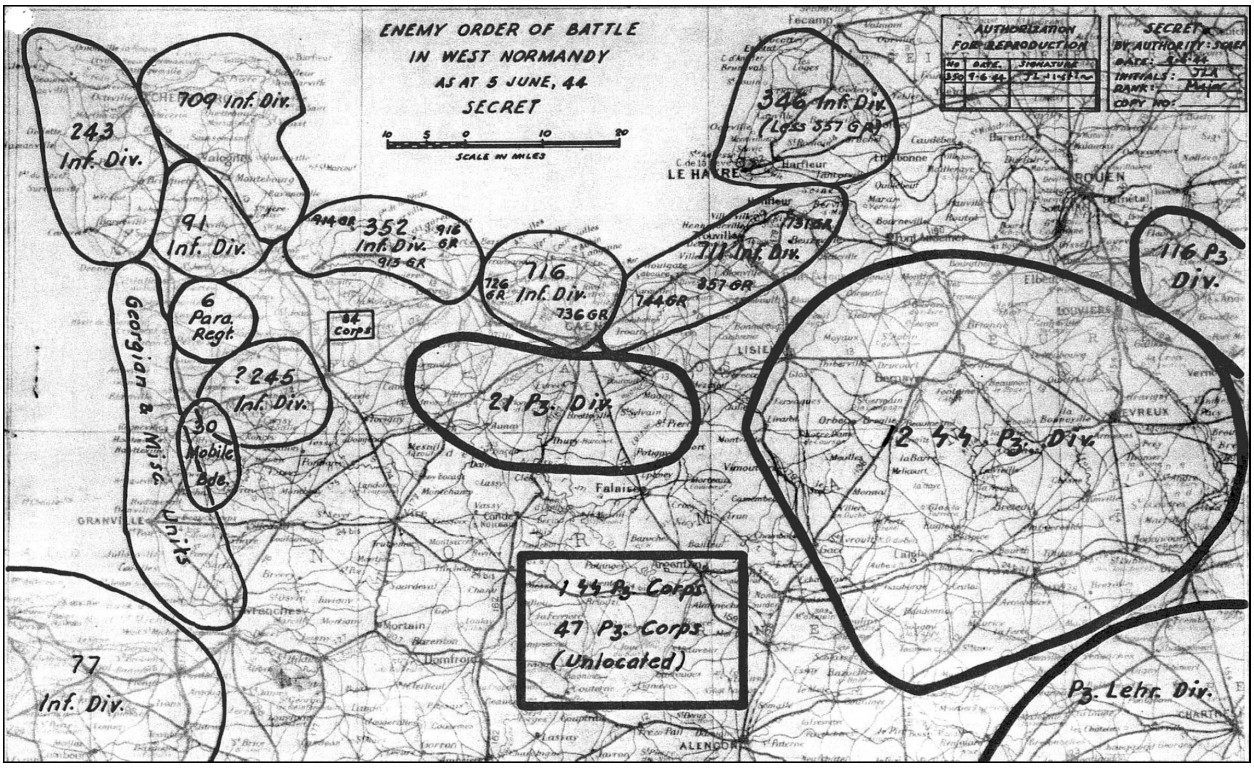
> The proposed deployment area covered the beaches between the River Dives and the mouth of the Seine, in the Fifteenth Army's area. All my

> experience in the east and training at the War College said that a panzer division should be held back for a counter-attack and not be so far forward that they become committed to the initial defensive battle that would immediately follow the invasion.[14]

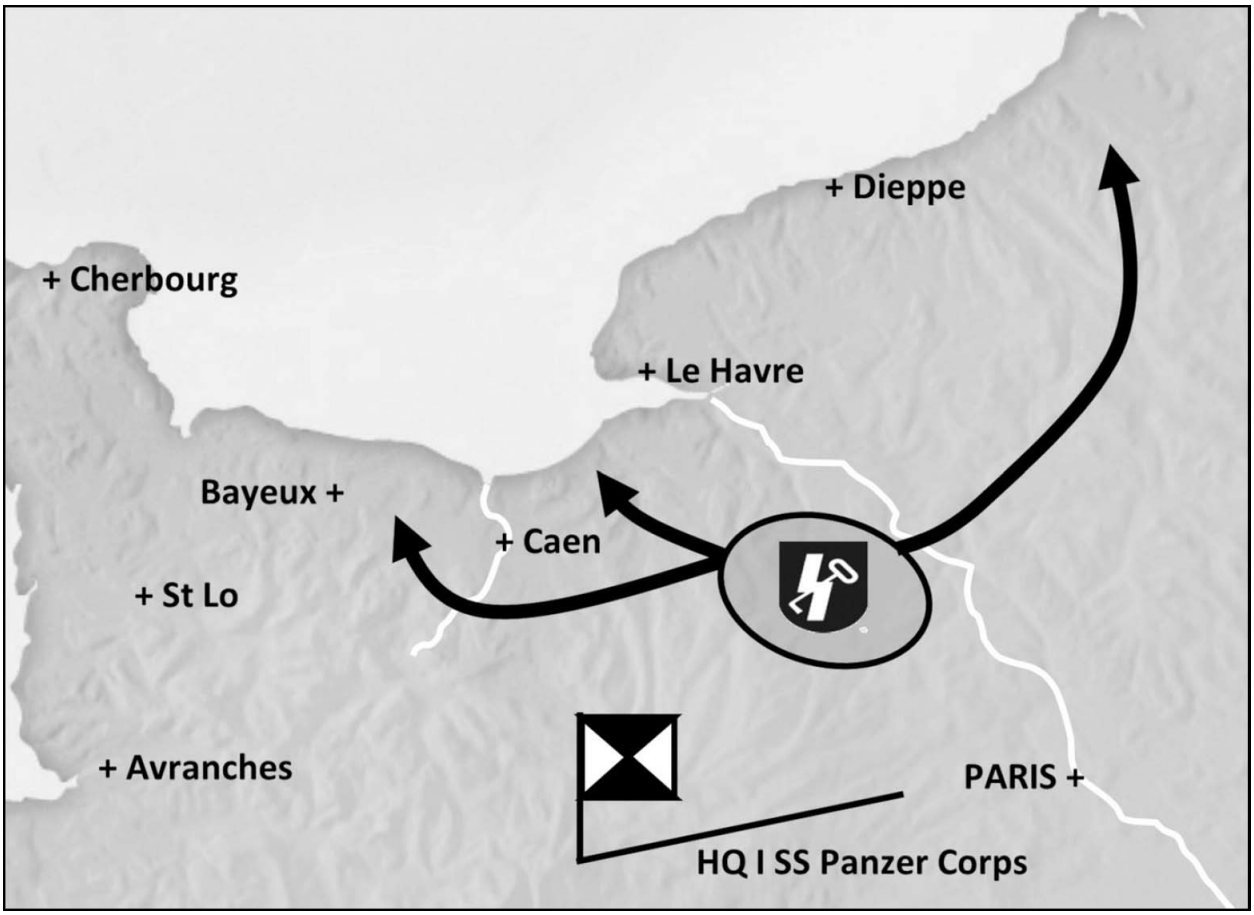
The *HJ* had been placed squarely into the argument over the deployment of the panzers. The conventional wisdom was that armour should indeed be held back for a decisive counter-attack as advocated by Guderian and Panzer Group West, who also feared that the panzer division's lines of communication would be cut by mass parachute landings.[15] Rommel, however, having felt the lash of the Allied fighter-bombers in the desert, believed that holding back the panzers would only move slowly and, with heavy losses to air interdiction, be able to intervene in the battle for the beachhead.[16] He wanted what he referred to as a string of pearls ready to win the battle on the beaches as the Allies came ashore. In the end, Hitler partly supported both courses of action and in the case of the *HJ*, *Sturmbannführer* Meyer's report to General Geyr von Schweppenburg and contacts in the SS *Hauptamt* ensured that the division deployed into a more conventional position within easy reach of the Seine crossings as German intelligence believed that the invasion would be east of the river in the Pas-de-Calais.

While the *Hitlerjugend*'s units arrived in Normandy, SS *Brigadeführer* Witt and his 1a liaised with LXXXI and LXXXIV Corps which held the coastline from the Seine to Avranches in the west. They were shocked to find that Hitler's vaunted Atlantic Wall was an incomplete string of coastal defences with little depth. According to Hubert Meyer they were given a huge area in which to prepare plans to deploy in order to counter the invasion:

A. Crossing the Seine between Paris and Rouen for action between the Somme and Seine rivers.
B. Deployment for action between the mouths of the Seine and Orne rivers.
C. Deployment for action in the area north-west and west of Caen.



An Allied map of the deployment of German divisions in the invasion area on 6 June 1944.



The *Hitlerjugend*'s deployment options.

The divisional staff made their plans and recced four routes in detail to each of the deployment areas from battalion and regimental alarm positions. One of these would be for the heavy tracked armoured units[17] and the other three for the lighter wheeled vehicles. In all cases the ability of bridges to bear the weight of heavily-laden trucks and panzers was critical, with the ability of the roads to bear the long columns being scarcely less important.

Arguably the first part of the 12th SS Panzer Division to be in action was the anti-aircraft battalion, along with the 20mm light AA guns of 14 Company, 26th *Panzergrenadiers* under command. They had been deployed to cover airfields and the crossings of the Seine and in the run-up to the invasion claimed four Lancaster bombers shot down at the cost of a handful of casualties, but RAF Bomber Command was nonetheless successful in destroying most of the bridges in their attempt to isolate Normandy.

Without a doubt both veteran SS officers and NCOs and most young

Hitlerjugend recruits found the raising and training of the division a positive experience. Working with motivated and committed recruits is one side of the story, but with any group of 25,000 people there are always incidents that show a smaller but different perspective.

One young trainee in the Recce Battalion raped a Belgian girl and was put before an SS Honour Court. Found guilty by *Hauptsturmführer* Olböter, he was given a revolver with which to commit suicide, which he did. His father was, however, a prominent regional politician, and influence and scandal ensured that Olböter was removed from the prime position of command of the Recce Battalion and was cross-posted to the III/26th *Panzergrenadiers*.

In incidents that seem harsh to the modern mind, Karl-Heinz Decker recalled two executions of deserters from the division. The first was early on while he was on the NCOs course at Lauenburg:

> I remember the chap who was executed as being a bit older than the rest of us, probably in his thirties. The man had deserted, but he had been caught by the military police. Following court martial, the man was sentenced to death by firing squad. On the morning of the execution the whole school was ordered to assemble on the parade ground. Once we were all assembled, the prisoner was led out and tied to a post. Then the charges were read aloud. The prisoner looked very pale, as if all the blood had drained from his face. He was asked if he wanted a blindfold, he declined. The six-man firing squad was ordered to take up position. The orders, ready, aim, fire, echoed around the parade ground. I was standing quite close to where the prisoner was and saw the body slump as the shots rang out. At the end of the day we had all taken an oath when we joined the SS, and this man had broken his oath, that's not on.

Another member of the division was executed for desertion on 5 June.

Declared Operational

On 1 June 1944 the commander of I SS Panzer Corps, Sepp Dietrich, inspected the division and declared that 'The division with the exception of the *Werfer Abteilung* [rocket mortar battalion] and the Anti-Tank Battalion is fully ready for any action in the west.'

The *Werfer Abteilung* lacked its towing vehicles, while the *Panzerjäger* (Anti-Tank) Battalion lacked virtually all its vehicles and guns and the Panzer Regiment was missing its command Panthers and recovery vehicles, but otherwise just five days before the invasion the division was declared ready for battle. (See Appendix I on the Order of Battle for other deficiencies.)

Chapter Two

The Invasion

> ‘Everyone was waiting for the attack across the Channel. We were fully aware that the decisive battles were approaching. Our first action lay ahead. We were looking forward to it.’ [*Sturmmann* Jochen Leykauff]

By early June 1944, with expectations of the invasion high, the *Hitlerjugend* was well prepared, having had the fuel to conduct exercises at regimental level with the division’s panzers in support. Back in their villages, dispersed across some 50 miles of country west of the Seine, they were ready. *Hauptsturmführer* Hans Siegel described the measures taken by the panzer regiment:

> Bomber squadrons were flying overhead every night and none of us knew whether paratroopers would not suddenly drop from the bomb bays and come floating down on us. Max Wünsche had prepared for this eventuality by ordering absolute quiet and camouflage during the day, the village offering a peaceful appearance and the soldiers were sleeping, armed. During the nights, everyone was up and about. The crews were ready for action right next to their panzers and extra live ammunition was ready to be issued. It was practically an alert situation, each in his position or immediate vicinity, ready for instant action. This began some four weeks before the start of the invasion.

It wasn’t until just after midnight on 5/6 June that the first Allied gliders and paratroopers landed in Normandy, heralding the beginning of the long-expected invasion. The Allies had, however, achieved tactical surprise thanks to the German estimation of tide times suitable for landing further east, where

they strongly believed an invasion in the Pas-de-Calais area would take place. Also German meteorologists, lacking the network of weather stations and craft available to their Allied counterparts, during a period of continued instability after the storm that delayed D-Day from 5 June believed that conditions were marginal for the invasion. Even though they reported that a ridge of weak high pressure was forming, so convinced were the commanders that the tides were wrong, they ignored the warning. This window in the weather provided the Allies with the opportunity to land on the beaches in Normandy.

The conviction that the Allies would not launch the invasion was such that the Seventh Army had ordered a command post exercise at Rennes, which was more than 110 miles to the south, and Rommel had travelled to Germany for his wife's birthday and to see Hitler. So strong was the belief that this was not the time for the invasion, the increase of 'personal messages' over the BBC to the French Resistance did not cause decisions to be reviewed. Even when at 2215 hours on the evening of 5 June a second line from Verlaine's poem *Chanson d'automne*, '… wound my heart with a monotonous languor', was intercepted, little was done! German intelligence knew this phrase was a warning to the Resistance that the invasion would take place within forty-eight hours, yet neither von Rundstedt nor Rommel's staff could be persuaded. Only the Fifteenth Army east of the River Dives was on the alert on their own initiative and in the Seventh Army, which was holding the invasion area, there were only local decisions to go to a higher state of alert. As a whole, the invasion coast remained on minimum manning.

A *Hitlerjugend* Panzer IV exercising in Normandy before the invasion.

Generalleutnant Dr Speidel, in command of Army Group B in Rommel's absence, shared *Feldmarschall* von Rundstedt's view as C-in-C West that the invasion was not imminent. This and further actions by him and others form a part of the SS's post-war conspiracy theory that there were those in the German command who actively wished to undermine their efforts to defeat the western Allies!

The 12th *Hitlerjugend* SS Panzer Division's sign. It incorporates the *Leibstandarte*'s key and an SS rune.

6 June: Invasion!

> 'There is enthusiasm everywhere. "We will show the Tommies" and similar lines dominated our conversation.' [*Sturmmann* Helmuth Pock]

The first inkling that the invasion had come was when the *Hitlerjugend*'s duty staff officer received a call from the Luftwaffe shortly before 0100 hours on 6 June to the effect that dummy parachutists (nicknamed 'Ruperts' by the Allies) had been dropped near their airfield and that real paratroopers had landed near the coast. Calls to the 711th Infantry Division on the coastal sector confirmed that they had the same dummies but had no reports of real parachutists. They also added that there were no indications of activity out to sea, concluding that the weather was poor with wind and occasional rain. The initial assessment across the German command in Normandy was that this was an Allied attempt to bluff the Germans into action to reveal their plans. So effective were the Ruperts that only gradually did the insistence of those on the ground that there were real paratroopers cut through the confusion. Even so, at 0215 hours General Speidel dismissed the Seventh Army reports

with the words ‘They’re still localised encounters.’

By 0230 hours overwhelming evidence that the invasion had begun reached the division and Fritz Witt formally began the process of alerting his men by issuing the codeword ‘Blucher’. Night exercises had been so frequent that when the units were roused Heini Fischer recalled that among the panzer pioneers

> … there was doubt in our minds if this was the real thing but when our *Scharfuhrer* repeated that it was the invasion, the look in his eye told us that this was not just another practice alert but definitely the real thing. We were already sleeping dressed, so all we had to do was grab our material and weapons and stand by our SPWs.[1]

The first planned reaction by the *Hitlerjugend* was to drive from their barrack locations to hides in tactical concentration areas, which they reached at around 0400 hours. From these hides they would be deployed onto the routes to either Option B or C (north to the coast or west to Caen). Shortly afterwards the flak assets guarding the Seine crossings were ordered to rejoin the division.

Meanwhile, RAF Bomber Command finished its night’s work attacking all the major and some of the lesser coastal artillery batteries and at 0550 hours the guns of the Allied naval bombardment forces opened fire on the coast from Houlgate in the east, west along the coast to the Cotentin peninsula. By that time, C-in-C West was signalling Army Group B that he had come to the conclusion that the landing of three enemy parachute divisions on such a wide frontage indicated that this ‘was not just a landing of local importance’.

An hour later US divisions started to land on beaches in the western part of the area and it was obvious that the invasion had begun but the question was ‘Is it a deception?’ While this was argued out, the *Hitlerjugend* remained stationary in its hides without orders.

‘Ruperts’ (a traditional nickname for young British army officers) came with a variety of devices to simulate a fire-fight and were designed to spread confusion.

Despite his reservations that the action in Normandy was a diversion, as

early as 0445 hours von Rundstedt had requested that OKW, co-located with the Führer at Berchtesgaden, release the *HJ* and *Panzer-Lehr* to his command in order 'to be ready for anything'. Eventually Hitler, who retained personal authority for the release of divisions from Panzer Group West, was woken and appeared unaccustomedly early at 0800 hours but still no decision was made.

In the meantime, C-in-C West ordered elements of the *Hitlerjugend* to be dispatched on reconnaissance tasks north and east to the coast and west to Caen: 'The 12 SS Panzer Division, without diminishing its role as OKW reserve, will immediately commence reconnaissance in the direction of the 711 Inf Div, establish and maintain contact with the 711 Inf Div, and watch in its own sector for a possible landing by air.'

As a result four patrols were dispatched by the Reconnaissance Battalion, commanded by junior officers and sergeants: one headed east to the mouth of the Seine, one towards Cabourg and the Dives, another to the coast between Ouistreham and St Aubin (SWORD and JUNO beaches) and the fourth north of Bayeux (GOLD Beach). *Obersturmführer* Hansmann commanded one of the patrols consisting of two armoured cars, which travelled west via Caen where there was 'hectic activity' and 'the sound of fighting' to the north around the Orne bridges, all of which he reported before heading further west to Bayeux with the order 'Panzer march 80'.

From Bayeux, with the increasing noise of battle, Hansmann's camouflaged Sd.Kfz.231/232 armoured cars with long-range radios headed across country via St Sulpice and Magny for the coast west of Arromanches. Dismounting and heading to high ground near Tracy, he arrived just before 0730 hours, in time to witness the run-in shoot by the navies and the landing craft heading for GOLD Beach. He saw

> … landing craft which spat out brown clumps of soldiers at the beach. I could see white columns of water rising in the landing area. Those were probably our coastal batteries. Then I could clearly hear the muzzle fire from German MG42s. At least our coastal defences had not been completely overrun. *Unterscharführer* Dahmann drew my attention to the brown figures who were slowly moving through the dunes. They were wearing flat steel helmets, so they were Brits. In groups, platoon

strength, even whole companies they were advancing slowly through the dunes towards us, seemingly without finding any resistance. They were still about 3,000m away, could be seen only with the binoculars. Some houses were burning in Arromanches. The smoke was drifting across to us, sometimes covering all of the bay from our view. Then I spotted tanks, 1, 2, 3 – a whole pack, strange forms. They came out of the bay, drove up the coastal road towards us, then swung east and zigzagged through the dunes without stopping to fire. They were probably crushing some individual pockets of resistance. Then I could clearly make out the large scoops on the front of the tanks [dozer blades fitted to some of the armoured vehicles]. Did they want to build a coastal road right away or dig out mines? Without pause, more and more tanks appeared directly from the sea. Was this possible? First, we could occasionally see their cupolas of the [Duplex Drive Shermans], then they rose from the waves like dinosaurs. And no one seemed to interfere with them. Was there no 8.8 Flak? Well no, the fighter-bombers were attacking the back slopes of the steep coast without hindrance. They dropped their rocket bombs into the concrete walls of the fortifications. I took another look at our lightly armoured reconnaissance vehicles. Were they sufficiently camouflaged? If they spotted us, we had had it. Even our Tigers were helpless against these ‘meat-flies’.[2]

But now it was time to quickly send off a report. The Division must immediately be warned of what was happening here! This was the invasion, there was no question. There were almost more ships than water. But who would believe it if he did not see it for himself?

An *Untersturmführer* and his Sd.Kfz.232 armoured car.

As he headed south-east to Ryes, Hansmann was soon reporting by radio[3] that the coastal defences were being overrun and the Tommies advancing inland with tanks supported by naval artillery, and then

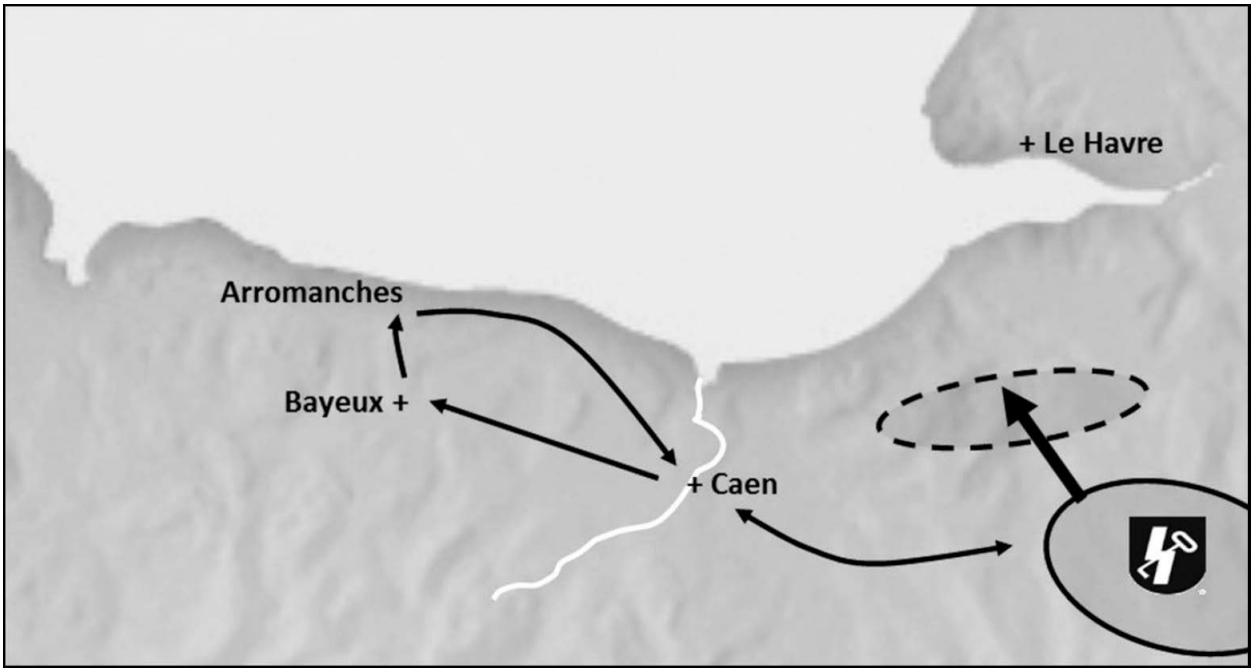
> There were immense explosions, whole mountains of dirt were hurled into the air and came crashing down in a radius of a few hundred metres. We were pressed flat to the ground, wishing to be back in our steel hulls which would at least protect us from shrapnel. But the side hatches were closed. I lifted myself up a bit and knocked against the armour plate. I

yelled, but the gunner, driver and radio operator did not understand that we wanted to get in from below rather than through the turret.

CERTIFIED that this is the true likeness of Willi HANSMANN

Field Investigation Section
War Crimes Group (NWE)

Obersturmführer Hansmann.



Hansmann's recce.

Hansmann wondered how he could have been seen, but he had unwittingly gone up onto the high ground above Ryes near to where some bunkers had been located by the Allies, which were marked on their maps. Given the time of around 0800 hrs, this was probably a part of the Allied naval fire plan rather than the engagement of just two soldiers.[4]

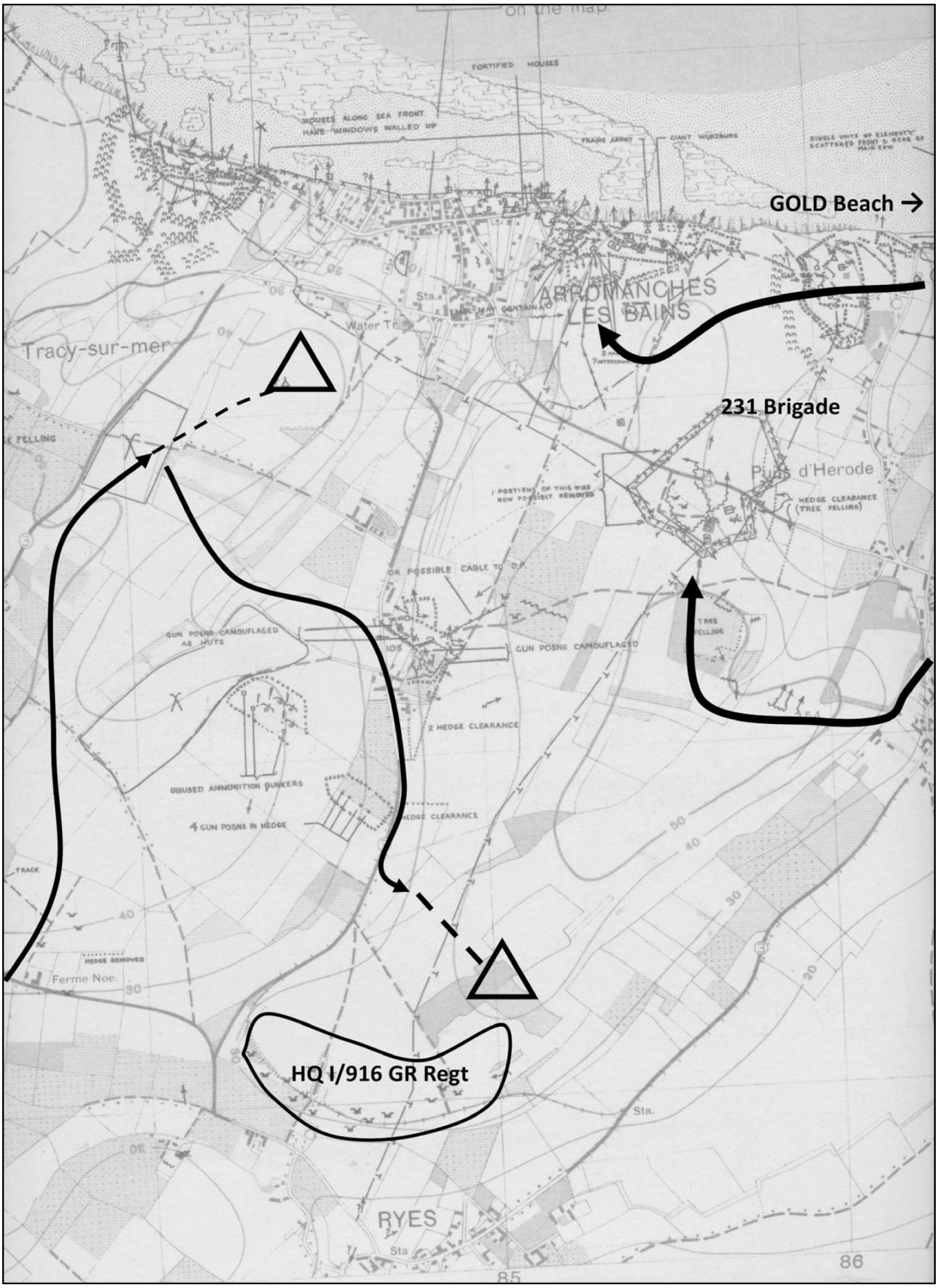
The patrol headed east via Creully from where the German artillery was firing, on towards Courseulles, JUNO Beach and back via Caen to report to Fritz Witt. The impression of the magnitude of the 'unstoppable' invasion was profound:

> I wanted to shout at all the generals right up to Adolf Hitler: 'Over here, quickly, before it's too late! Whoever can fight come here! The fastest, most powerful divisions, send them here! The Luftwaffe … where is it? The Navy … where is it? It must get here!'

However, the dispersal of the British parachutes to the east of the Orne and Dives rivers, the Ruperts and SAS Operation TITANIC,[5] overloaded the German staff who were trying to work out what was happening and causing

confusion.[6] By 0700 hours, however, the *Hitlerjugend*'s staff were receiving orders from the Fifteenth Army to support the 711th Division east of the Orne. This was in the area of Option B, but Hubert Meyer explained:

> From the area the division was now instructed to assemble, there were only two combinations of roads and bridges, not the four that we had recced and planned. This was shocking to us; it would take a very long time for us to reach the coast. I rang Fritz Krämer[7] at I SS Panzer Division to appeal for help with no effect. Army Group B seemed determined to deploy us where they had wanted us when we had first arrived in Normandy.[8]

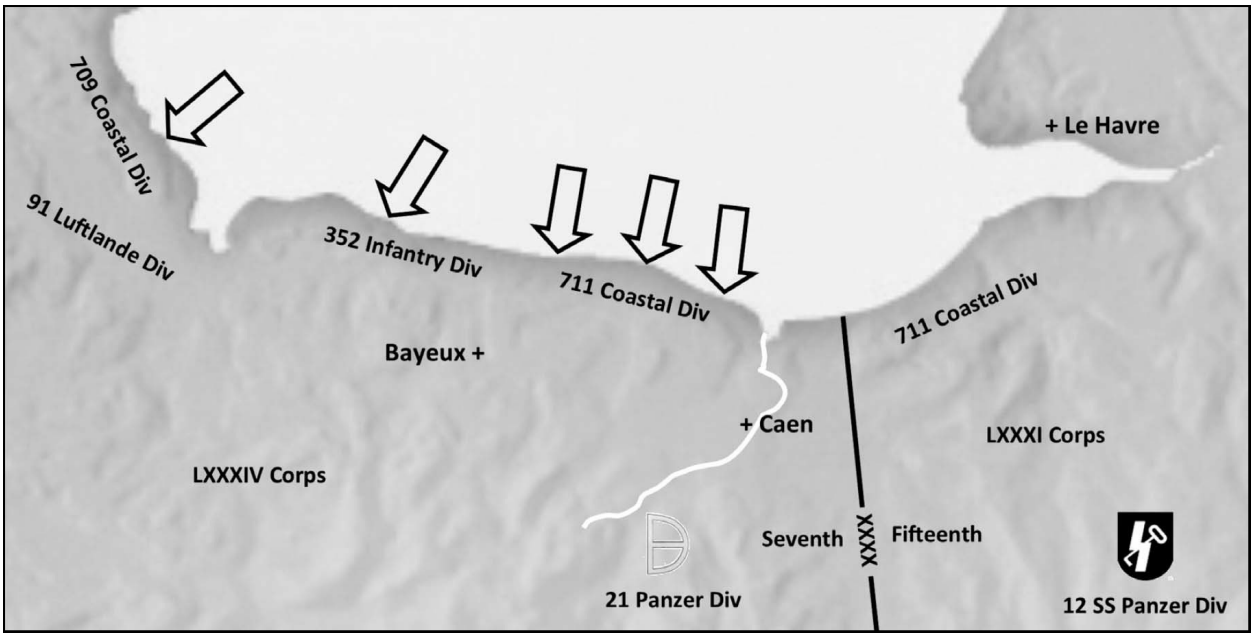

GOLD Beach →
231 Brigade
HQ I/916 GR Regt
Tracy-sur-mer
ARROMANCHES
LES BAINS
Puits d'Herode
Ferme Noe.
RYES
FORTIFIED HOUSES
HOUSES ALONG SEA FRONT HAVE WINDOWS WALLED UP
GUN POSNS CAMOUFLAGED AS HUTS
GUN POSNS CAMOUFLAGED
DISUSED AMMUNITION BUNKERS
4 GUN POSNS IN HEDGE
2 HEDGE CLEARANCE
HEDGE CLEARANCE (TREE FELLING)
HEDGE REMOVED
TRACK
Sta.
85
86

An extract of the 1:12,500 invasion overprint map showing Ryes, the bunkers and Hansmann's likely positions of observation.

With *Sturmbannführer* Hubert Meyer and the staff working out new routes to the revised assembly area and amending march tables, the two routes were piqueted by the anti-aircraft battalion. The Panthers and Mk IV panzers which were deployed with the *panzergrenadiers* for planned exercise were ordered to remain grouped with them. The 25th *Panzergrenadiers* were the first to march at 1000 hours on one of the original planned routes. The remainder had to await the amended orders and their columns of vehicles did not begin to leave their hides for another hour. However, with the situation in the 711th Division's area being clarified and the scale of the threat north and north-west of Caen becoming more than apparent, about midday von Rundstedt started to request the transfer of the *HJ* to the Seventh Army around Caen in the sector of the 716th Coastal Division.

Immediate reaction was not possible as the division would be marching for some hours to the new assembly area and the routes to the proposed deployment to the south-west of Caen needed planning. It wasn't until 1432 hours that OKW in Berchtesgaden released the *HJ* to the Seventh Army. The mission they were given, however, didn't follow until 1700 hours:

> The 12 SS Pz Div and the Panzer Lehr Div are attached to the AOK [Seventh Army] with immediate effect for action against the bridgehead in the sector of 716 Inf Div. The AOK issues the following order through Panzer Group West:
>
> (1) The 12 SS Pz Div is to deploy immediately northward … in the area on both sides of Évrecy … and is initially attached to LXXXIV AK. Its mission is to drive the enemy who has broken through, adjacent to the 21 Pz Div on the west, back into the sea and destroy him.



Defenders of the Normandy coast.

Panzer Lehr, which had also been released by the OKW, was to eventually come into the line to the west of the *Hitlerjugend*.

While the division was still moving, the staff now had to plan the deployment to the west. Hubert Meyer recorded the frustration in the headquarters:

> We knew we were urgently required around Caen but our regiments were away from the prepared routes and thanks to orders we had wasted half the day but fortunately we were now able to use parts of the routes for Option C and we sent reconnaissance ahead to the west.

The 25th *Panzergrenadiers* were nearest in the assembly area to the revised deployment area and the *Standartenführer* duly dispatched patrols west to Caen.

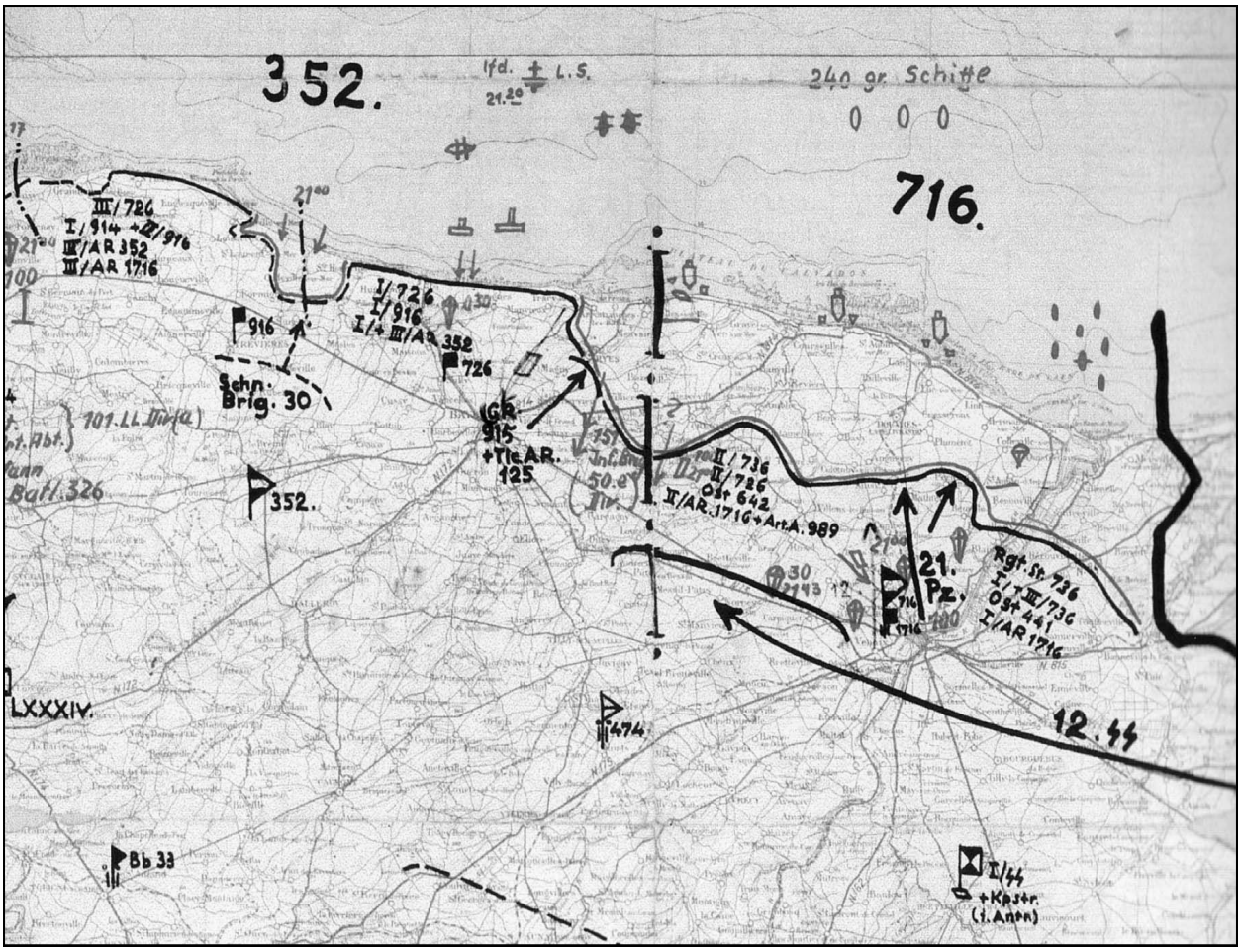
It wasn't, however, until 1800 hours that divisional Tactical HQ set out to drive to 21st Panzer Division's HQ, but the low cloud that had helped cover movement during the morning had now given way to clear skies and fighter-bombers. The torrid time that the 21st Panzer had transiting west around Caen during the afternoon resulted in the bulk of the *Hitlerjugend* being initially ordered not to march until 2000 hours, but General Speidel in an attempt to make up for lost time ordered an immediate move. With the roads

crammed with the division's transport, inevitably the fighter-bombers struck.

Riding in a truck, *Sturmmann* Pock of the 25th *Panzergrenadiers*, which was leading the division's main body west, recorded in his diary:

> The number of our vehicles knocked out keeps growing. They are sitting where they were hit, burnt out. Grenades are scattered about, shells, all types of ammunition, amongst them dead soldiers.
>
> The march this day becomes more dangerous. The pastures and fields are ploughed by bomb craters. We realise more and more that the enemy, as far as material is concerned, does not seem to be inferior to us.

A column of *HJ* vehicles on the march in Normandy including a panther, half-track motorcyclists and a Kubelwagen.



A part of the Seventh Army situation map as at 2200 hours on D-Day, showing the deployment west of the *Hitlerjugend*.

The cost, for instance, to I/12 SS Panzer Regiment was six trucks destroyed and a further eight damaged and across the division twenty-two men had been killed, sixty were wounded and one missing.[9]

Thus it was that one of the strongest formations in the west was tied up well away from the battle area as a result of mis-appreciation of the situation east of the Orne and delay in issuing timely orders to respond to the threat west of Caen. The failure to bring the *HJ* into combat on 6 June must be regarded as one of the lost German opportunities of the Battle of Normandy, as well as a great success for Allied deception.

7 June: Counter-Attack

The long route, slow night movement, enemy bombing and the return at

daylight of allied fighter-bomber interdiction sorties meant that only the 25th *Panzer-grenadiers* were west of Caen and in a position to fulfil the division's mission. *Standartenführer* Kurt Meyer had taken eight hours to reach Caen, telling General Richter that '… I lay for a good four hours in roadside ditches because of air attack.' Meyer established his regimental headquarters on the western outskirts of Caen[10] and waited for the battalions of the 25th *Panzergrenadiers* to arrive. Around midnight he was summoned to 716th Coastal Division's headquarters in a cave in the quarries on the northern outskirts of Caen. Here it was apparent that this division had all but ceased to exist and that the 21st Panzer Division's afternoon counter-attack had failed and its units were falling back to the high ground covering Caen. Meyer's task for 7 June was to operate on the left flank of 21st Panzer: he was, if necessary, to secure the Carpiquet airfield and in coordination with 21st Panzer launch a counter-attack north at 1200 hours. The *panzergrenadiers* would initially be advancing to deliver the attack through the scattered detachments of 716th Division, which still held villages north-west of Caen. According to General Feuchtinger, commander of the 21st, Kurt Meyer 'studied the map, turned to me with a confident air and said "Little fish! We'll throw them back into the sea."'[11]

Standartenführer Kurt Meyer.

That morning the *Hitlerjugend*'s divisional headquarters issued its confirmatory operation order:

3. The Division in conjunction with the 21st Panzer Division will attack the landed enemy and throw him back into the sea.
6. Objective: The beach …[12]

At about 0900 hours Kurt Meyer left to drive to the Abbey d'Ardenne to establish his tactical headquarters adjacent to his regiment assembly area. The journey was again to say the least difficult, running the gauntlet of fighter and fighter-bomber strafing attacks!

> I set out for our forward command post at the Ardenne monastery. Erich, my driver, had already traded in our Kfz.15[13] for a smaller Volkswagen Kübelwagen in order not to provide too obvious a target, but this precautionary measure was not of much use. We would hardly start moving when we found ourselves in a ditch. Machine-gun bursts from the fighter-bombers tore up the earth around us. Back into the vehicle – and after a couple of hundred metres an elegant leap back into the ditch! It almost drove us crazy, but Erich soon learned how to handle it. He set off like greased lightning and, as soon as a fighter-bomber started its dive, he stepped on the brakes so hard that the car almost overturned. In that way he got me to the monastery. I was happy to have solid walls around me.

After a sleepless night on foot, having dismounted from their trucks south of Caen, the infantry battalions of the 25th *Panzergrenadiers* had moved forward to the assembly area, while the 150mm and 100mm guns of the III/12th Artillery Regiment were by mid-morning in position around the western outskirts of Caen ready to support the attack. Meyer continued:

> The soldiers waved at me. They were moving forward to their baptism of fire in a calm manner. They showed no self-pity. They were determined to prove themselves. Relentless attacks by fighter-bombers and naval guns hit the approach routes. Nevertheless, the assembly areas were reached in time.

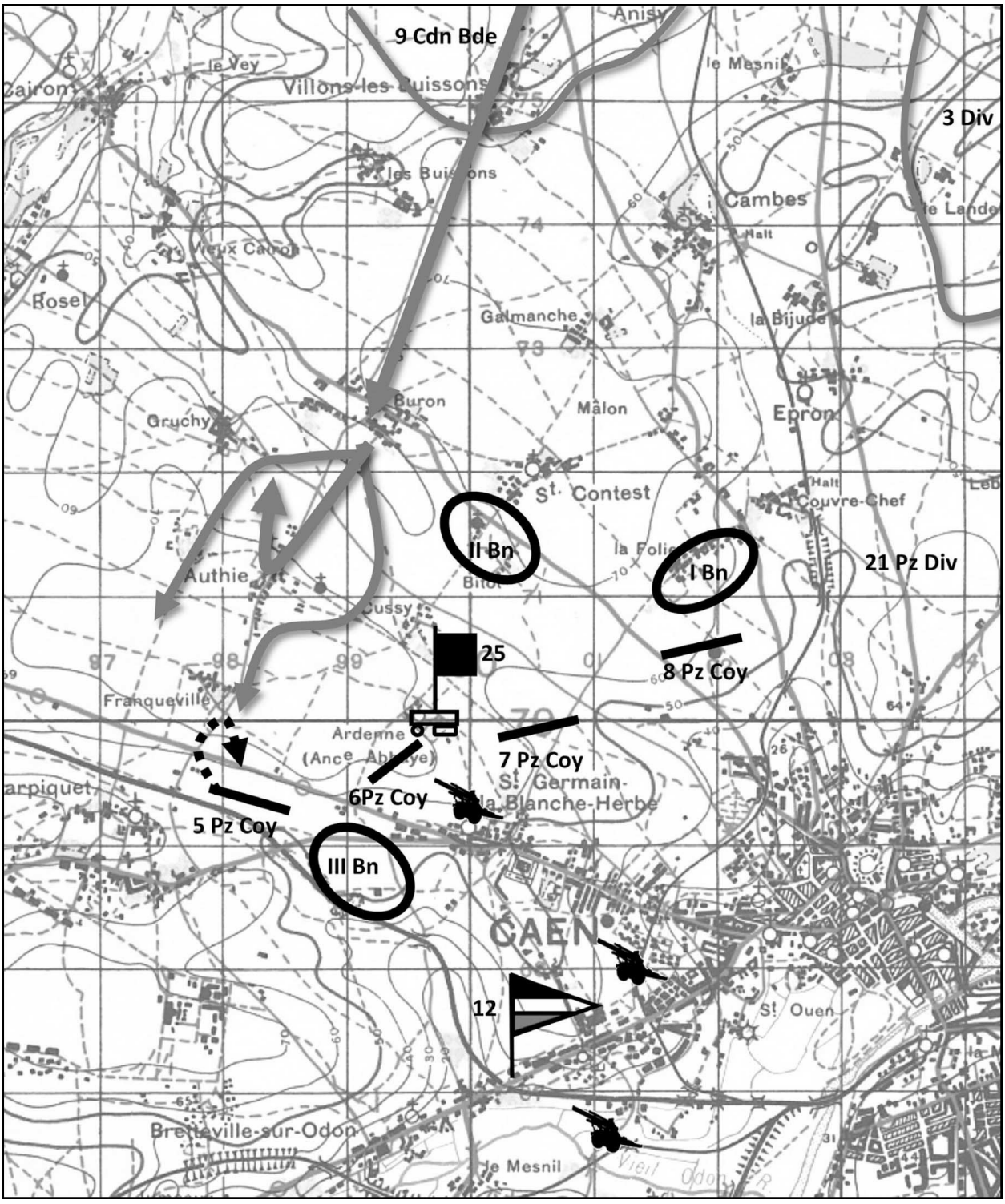
The panzers were, however, delayed. Thanks to the fighter-bombers,

arrangements for the delivery of vital fuel at the end of the march west had been disrupted. The attack was delayed to 1600 hours, but at 1330 *Sturmbannführer* Karl Heinz Prinz reported that tanks of all five[14] of his panzer companies had arrived with some fifty Mark IVs ready for action in the assembly area;[15] 'The rest were somewhere along the approach route and would arrive during the course of the night.'

> I then felt considerably better. Our attack would have inevitably been condemned to failure without tank support.
>
> If only we could eliminate that damned naval gunfire. The heavy shells were roaring above our heads like express trains, digging themselves into the rubble of the town. The fighter-bombers hardly bothered us anymore; we knew we would continue to have that plague above us constantly from then on.
>
> I climbed a tower, so as to have a look at the terrain. I thought I might be able to see the coast. What a surprise! The terrain as far as the coast was spread before me like a sand table. There was intense activity on the coast. Ship after ship bobbed on the water; countless barrage balloons protected this armada from air attack. The latter measure was unnecessary; the Luftwaffe appeared not to exist any more.

Up in the north-west turret of the abbey, Meyer waited for the order to attack and looked deep into Allied territory, which he likened to an 'ant hill of activity'; the 3rd British and 3rd Canadian divisions were moving forward to complete the advance to their D-Day objectives. For the British it was Caen and the Canadians, Line OAK; the Caen to Bayeux railway, and the Carpiquet airfield. They were facing some remnants of the 716th Division (pioneers, artillery and anti-tank gunners) grouped together as *Kampfgruppe* Rauch, which provided a screen extending west from the railway line at Cambes to the Rio Mue at Cairon. Behind them were the remnants of the 716th's infantry arranged in an ersatz battalion holding the villages of Buron, Authie and Franqueville.

German troops in one of the Abbey towers looking out over the battlefield.



The Canadian advance and the *Hitlerjugend*'s deployment at 1400 hours on 7 June 1944.

As Meyer waited, scanning the ground over which his regiment was to advance to the attack, he spotted movement nearby:

> Was I seeing clearly? An enemy tank was pushing through the orchards of Contest! It then stopped. The commander opened his hatch and observed the terrain. Was he blind? Didn't he realize he was only 200 metres from the *panzergrenadiers* of the 11/25 SS *Panzergrenadier* Regiment and the barrels of our anti-tank guns were directed at him? Obviously not. He calmly lit a cigarette and looked at its smoke. Not a single round was fired. The battalion maintained excellent fire discipline.
>
> I then saw what was happening! It had become clear. The tank had been sent forward to provide flank cover. Enemy tanks were rolling towards Authie from Buron. My God! What an opportunity! The tanks were moving right across the front of the II/25 SS *Panzergrenadier* Regiment! The enemy formation was showing us its unprotected flank. I issued orders to all battalions, the artillery and the tanks: 'Do not fire! Fire on my command only!'

What Meyer was seeing was the advance of the 9th Canadian Brigade, which had been in action all morning tangling with the remains of the 716th Division's infantry, 21st Panzer and some 88mm guns. Villons-les-Buissons and Buron had been captured at 1300 hours by the North Nova Scotia Highlanders, supported by the Sherman tanks of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers. The Canadian infantry advanced again and cleared Authie but, having outrun their artillery, they pulled back to some high ground north of the village while the guns were brought into range. Meanwhile, the Canadians' armour, having enveloped the village and encountered no opposition, headed on south to Franqueville. Meyer continued:

> The commander of 12th SS Panzer Regiment had positioned his command vehicle in the garden of the monastery. Wire [remote radio cable] was quickly laid to the tank and the enemy situation relayed from the tower to all the tanks. One panzer company [the 6th] was in the monastery grounds and another on the reverse slope south of Franqueville.
>
> The enemy commander only seemed concerned with the airfield; it was right in front of him. He already controlled it with his weapons. He

> did not realize that destruction awaited him on the reverse slope. As soon as his tanks crossed the Caen-Bayeux road [N13] he would run into the [5th] panzer company of the II/SS-Panzer-Regiment 12. Only a few metres separated the iron monsters from each other, and we were staring spellbound at this spectacle! Wünsche, commander of SS-Panzer-Regiment 12, quietly transmitted the enemy tank movements. Nobody dared raise his voice.

While the panzers waited for the order to move up to the crest line *Untersturmführer* Herbert Walther, Adjutant of II/25 Panzer Regiment, was appalled to see a vehicle belonging to III/25 *Panzergrenadiers* motoring up onto the ridge in front of them. He was furious; it was *Sturmbannführer* Milius' Orders group and they could not have been more obvious or likely to alert the Canadians. Although Milius was senior, Walther took him to task in no uncertain terms. When Milius later complained, *Sturmbannführer* Karl-Heinz Prinz supported his adjutant.

At 1415 hours, with the leading Canadian tanks passing Franqueville to the east and crossing the crest and heading down to the Caen-Bayeux road, what was to become an ambush was sprung. The battle began when a platoon of Panzer IVs almost drove into the Canadians, almost instantly losing three tanks. The battle had not started well for the *Hitlerjugend*, but as the Canadians came up the slope to the N13 the 75mm guns mounted in the Panzer IVs of the 5th Company opened a devastating fire on the leading squadron[16] and oily black smoke was rising from the burning tanks. The 6th Company joined the action from the flank as a fresh Canadian squadron pushed south around Authie. *Obersturmführer* Bando's 5th Company alone claimed to have knocked out nine Shermans in what was the division's first action.

As the fire-fight began, Meyer gave the order for the 25th *Panzergrenadiers* to attack. All three of his infantry battalions led by the *alt Hase* ('old hares') of the *Leibstandarte*, supported by panzers, began to advance. The 6th Company's soldiers claimed to have knocked out ten enemy tanks for the loss of two of their own. *Sturmmann* Fenn was a crewman in one of them:

As we advanced, we took a lot of prisoners which we sent back to the grenadiers without getting out of our panzers. We advanced further through the gently rolling terrain. We suddenly found ourselves on a wide open plain, under fire from anti-tank guns … firing from 1,500 to 2,000 metres. We were unable to knock out the anti-tank guns and then we were hit. The shell ripped off my commander's leg … the whole panzer was immediately in flames. I lost consciousness since the rubber cover of my gunner's hatch melted and jammed, preventing me from getting out. Subconsciously, I managed to crawl to the loader's hatch. I only remember the moment when I fell headfirst from the hatch to the ground.

Obersturmbannführer Max Wünsche.

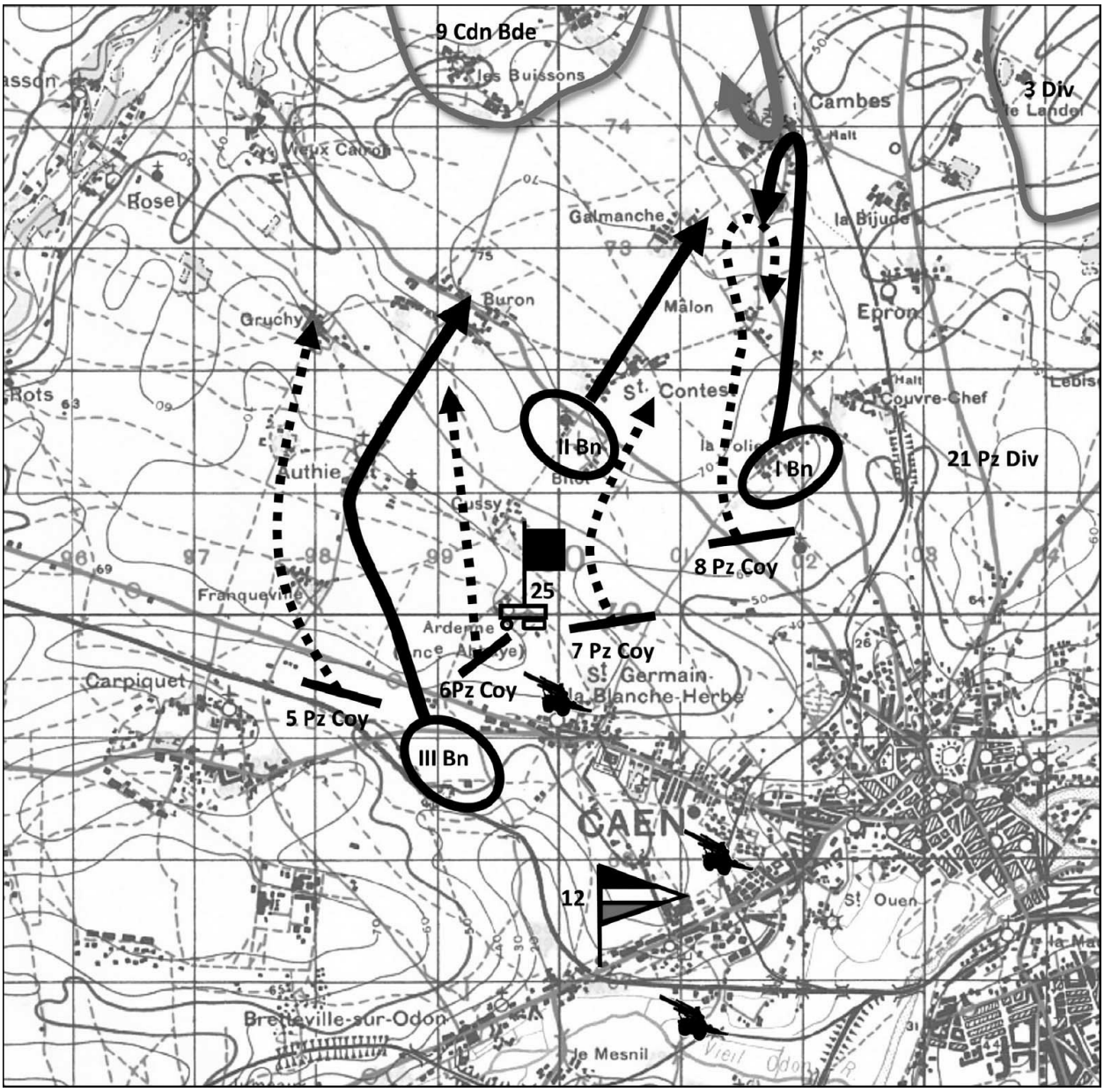
Standartenführer Kurt ‘Panzer’ Meyer.

A *Hitlerjugend* senior NCO and crewman inspect a Sherman that they knocked out near Authie.

Despite casualties among the *Hitlerjugend*'s panzers, Meyer had the Canadians' tanks falling back to Buron. Meanwhile, the infantry advance had begun with two companies forward and one in reserve, plus the support of the guns of III/12 Artillery Regiment, the heavy artillery and their own 80mm mortars. With the Canadian guns still out of range and with the Forward Operating Base unable to contact the cruiser supporting the 9th Canadian Brigade, the situation was seemingly in favour of the young soldiers of the *Hitlerjugend*.

In *Standartenführer* Kurt Meyer's plan III Battalion held the *Schwerpunkt* (centre), attacking Authie and Buron with the 5th Panzer Company moving on its left and a pair of the regiment's 150mm infantry guns (13th Company) in support. To their right the 6th and 7th Panzer companies advanced astride the village of Cussy. Beyond them to the right II Battalion advanced on Cambes via St Contest and Galmanche. On the regiment's right flank, I

Battalion, also heading for Cambes, had 8th Panzer Company in support along with four infantry guns. The 9th Panzer Company remained in reserve.



The attack of the 25th *Panzergrenadiers* on 7 June 1944.

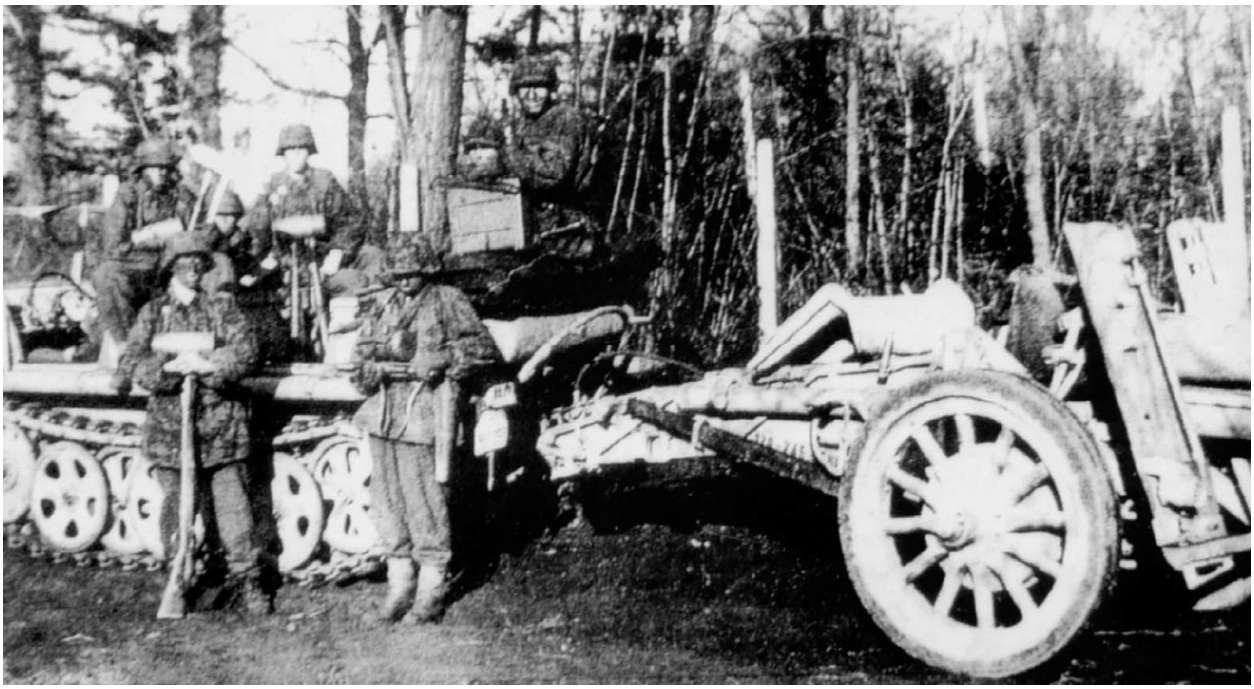
III Battalion's advance swept forward, driving the two platoons of Canadians who were caught off balance while withdrawing from Authie before them. Grenadier Balko was with the 9th Company and recalled:

> When the panzers and artillery fire stopped, we charged into the village and just as we had been taught worked from house to house, throwing

> grenades when necessary, chasing the enemy and taking prisoner those who were too slow or wounded. When we reached the edge of the village, we faced another open field to another village, which was being shelled by our artillery.[17]

The time taken to clear Authie bought time for the Canadians to regain their balance and for their artillery to have completed its move forward into range. Their fire forced the panzers of the 6th and 7th companies to withdraw into the cover of Cussy. In accordance with SS practice, Kurt Meyer left his vantage point up in the Abbey to give personal impetus to the attack. It is often argued that it would have been better to remain where he could influence and control the whole battle:

The Abbey d'Ardenne and its towers, from which III/12 SS Artillery Regiment's commander, *Sturmbannführer* Bartling, personally directed the fire support.



The 150mm sIG 33 infantry gun, and its Sd.Kfz.10 used by the 13th Infantry Gun Company.

> I jumped on a motorcycle and went over to the III/25 SS *Panzergrenadier* Regiment. I encountered the first wounded. They were going to the aid station in the monastery. About fifty Canadians were standing with their hands up guarded by some *panzergrenadiers* in the orchard at Cussy. I let them lower their arms and ordered their immediate evacuation to the monastery … just beyond the last farm it was more lively than I would have liked. I had scarcely reached open ground when Canadian 'greetings' were flying around my ears. The tanks at the southern outskirts of Buron were trying to fire at me, but it was not so easy – I dashed across the fields like lightning.

Meyer ordered a resumption of the attack, but Buron would be an altogether tougher proposition for the 25th *Panzergrenadiers*. The Canadians who had been ejected from Authie had rallied to the north of the village and were attempting to dig shell scrapes, but German artillery fire on Buron prevented them from being reinforced. When the renewed attack developed, A Company of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders was eventually overrun.[18] In the meantime, Kurt Meyer had been forced to take cover somewhere north of

Cussy:

> At that point they got me! I no longer know how I got to be lying next to a Canadian soldier. Smoke and explosions surrounded me without interruption. The Canadian and I were in a bomb crater. We watched each other nonplussed. We kept close to the crater's edge, not letting each other out of sight. We were in the middle of Canadian artillery fire and ducked especially low when the heavy rounds from the naval guns came roaring over. My motorcycle was laying on the path through the field; it was just a heap of wreckage.
>
> I don't remember how long I laid in that damned hole. I could see, however, that the *panzergrenadiers* were just about to enter Buron. Tanks were burning on both sides of the village.

While the panzers and Shermans fought it out, the infantry of the 9th Company filtered forward through the tall standing crops. *Sturmmann* Vasold was in the heart of the fighting. 'We attacked Buron with the remaining Panzers. Again, house-to-house fighting. Many prisoners were taken.'

With Buron captured, Meyer was eventually picked up by a dispatch rider and taken towards Buron, which was under artillery and naval gunfire the like of which Meyer, an Eastern Front veteran, had not seen before. Outside the village he met the battalion commander *Sturmbannführer* Milius and left him with instructions to advance on Les Buissons. Vasold continued: 'We pushed past the edge of the village where, with heavy machine-gun fire, we pressed our heads into the ground. There was no possibility of further advance. We had to withdraw again. A panzer gave us cover fire.'

Believing the situation in hand at Buron, Meyer headed east to Bitot to visit II Battalion, which he had ordered to take St Contest once Authie had been secured. Arriving on the pillion of a motorcycle, he found that the 7th Company had advanced at 1500 hours and taken their first objective, again relatively easily, but while pausing to allow his two rear companies to catch up, the battalion commander had been killed when a troop of British tanks appeared in front of them. The intervention of the 7th Panzer Company drove the Shermans off and the advance on Galmanche resumed, which was occupied without difficulty.

On the regiment's right flank, I Battalion, with five of *Hauptsturmführer* Siegel's 8th Company panzers in support, was ordered to begin its advance on Cambes at 1615 hours. Once again, the advance was only lightly opposed, but having advanced 1.5 miles and approached Cambes, 'all hell broke loose'. What had happened is that the battalion had run into a British attack coming from the opposite direction which had reached Cambes just before them. There was a confused fight in the village, but the British had tanks in support, while all five of the Mark IVs had broken down, become stuck or had been hit, suffering mobility kills. In the resultant fighting in the village streets *Panzerfausts* proved its worth, knocking out three Shermans and forcing the surviving tanks back out of the village.[19]

The *panzergrenadiers* fought their way through the village, but were brought to a halt in the woods on the northern side of Cambes, where Allied and German artillery pounded the wood where the fighting was now taking place. As a result, the infantry of both sides fell back, leaving Cambes in no man's land.

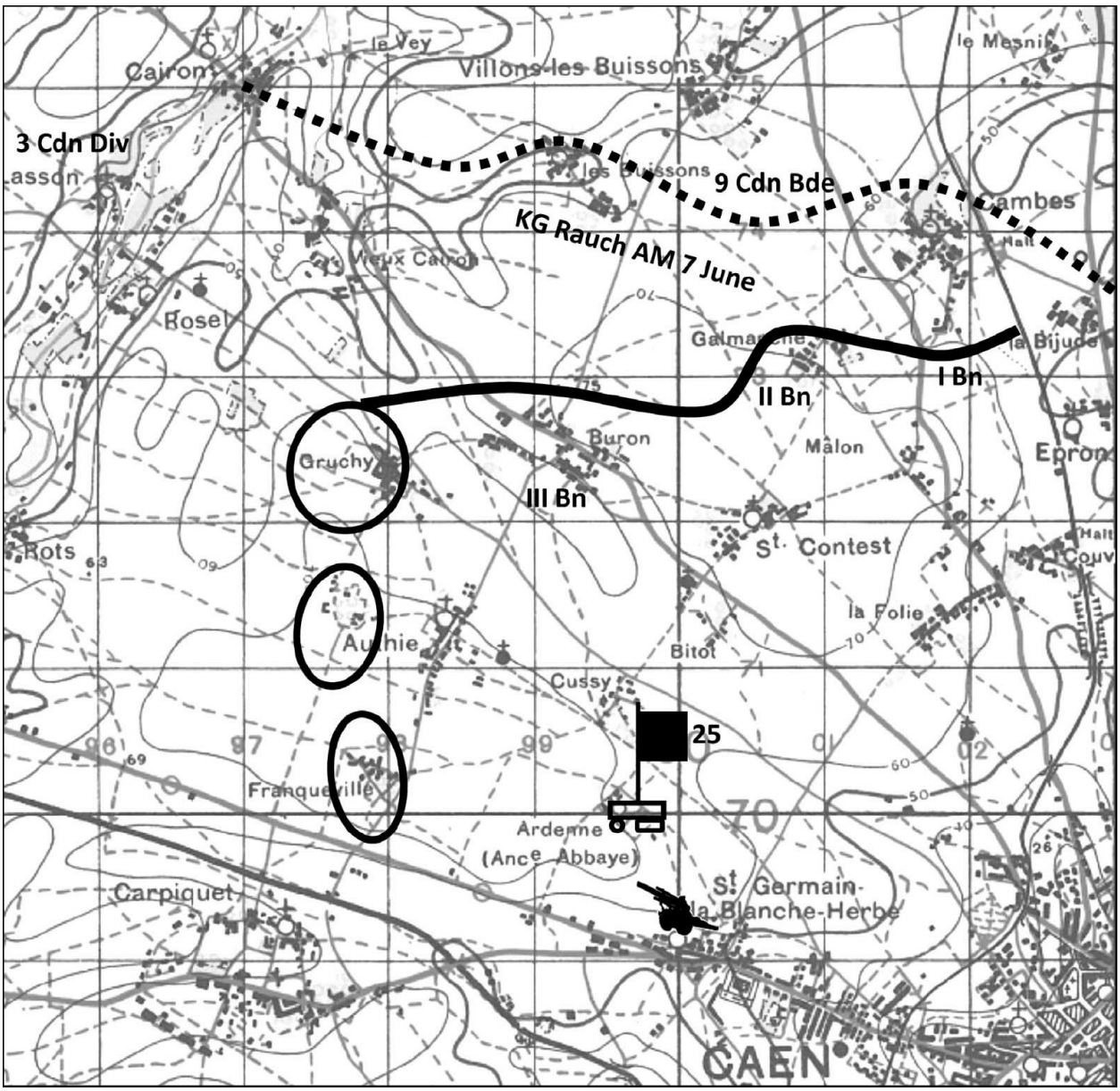
Klaus Elfeld of the 25th's Panzer Pioneer Company (16th Company) was on the very left flank of the attack:

> My platoon with panzers [of 5th Company] with several of our anti-tank guns was west of Authie. We found to our surprise that there were a few soldiers of a coastal division in the village of Gruchy. They weren't very happy that we had mortared them. They soon disappeared and we prepared defences facing west. That night we were joined by the 88mm guns of the flak battalion.

The 16th Company, along with the anti-aircraft guns of the 14th Company, covered what would have been an open flank extending 2 miles south from II Battalion's positions in Buron. Two companies of 88mm guns of the divisional anti-aircraft battalion thickened up the anti-tank defence on this flank. The Canadians, however, whose outposts were a mile further west at Rots, did not press this flank.[20]

From the German perspective, while Meyer's attack had not made anywhere near the ground north as intended, the 25th *Panzergrenadiers* had failed to reach the line held that morning but the advance of the British and

Canadians had been halted and the Carpiquet Airfield denied to them. However, as the Canadian *Official History* states, 'Meyer was fought to a standstill.' In Meyer's defence, 21st Panzer, having been in action containing the British all morning, was not in a position to regroup and launch a significant attack that afternoon and the *HJ*'s attack lacked scale to deliver significant results. When criticized for making only modest gains of up to 2 miles by the Canadian intelligence officer Milton Shulman:[21,22]



The line held by the 25th *Panzergrenadiers* on the evening of 7 June 1944.

Meyer vigorously denied that it was anti-tank gun fire that stopped him from getting forward to the sea. ‘We failed to achieve more substantial results on 7 June because in the long drive to the front we had exhausted our petrol supply. I tried to replenish it, but it was impossible. I could, therefore, only use half my tank strength in the attack.’ Feuchtinger [21st Panzer] scoffed at this excuse. ‘If Meyer was really short of petrol, why didn’t he mention it to me, I could have given him all he wanted if he had asked for it.’

The commander of II/12 SS Panzer Regiment, *Sturmbannführer* Prinz (centre), seen here with two of the artillery battalion commanders, was awarded the Knight’s Cross of the Iron Cross for his part in the battle on 7 June 1944.

The memorial to the murdered Canadian soldiers in the grounds of the Abbey d'Ardenne.

The lack of fuel was a convenient excuse but one with some truth. The essential issue was that the fighter-bombers and fuel distribution meant that Meyer's panzers had only broad numerical parity with the Canadian armour in the area of the attack. In addition, his panzers were outgunned by the Canadians' towed 17-pounders and Sherman Fireflies. The firepower that the Canadians were eventually able to bring to bear as a result of the crisis that his attack produced was crushing. Meyer was fortunate to hold onto any of his gains. In short, the delays, for the reasons already discussed, resulted in an attack that lacked sufficient combat power.

The losses to the *Hitlerjugend* during the attack on 7 June were significant: some 350 men became casualties and thirteen Panzer IVs were knocked out, though most were recovered for repair.

The Abbey d'Ardenne Murders

On the evening of 7 June 1944 eleven of the prisoners taken by the 25th

Panzer-grenadiers that afternoon were murdered at the Abbey, shot or killed by a blow to the back of the neck. There were further executions over the following ten days, bringing the total to twenty, as the enmity between the Canadians and *Hitlerjugend* spilled over into brutality. This will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

The *Hitlerjugend* in Action

> ‘The third day [8 June] was again marked by the uninterrupted employment of the enemy’s air force. It covered the combat area as far as the hinterland and thus neutralised our own panzer attacks, put staffs out of action and disrupted radio communication.’ [OKW War Diary, 8 June 1944]

From the Abbey d’Ardenne, on the unreasonably long front west of Caen that the 12th *Hitlerjugend* SS Panzer Division should have occupied during 7 June, there was only minor action. For the Germans this was due to delays caused by Allied air interdiction and for the Canadian 7th Brigade it was the need to complete their D-Day tasks by closing up to Line OAK at Bretteville-l’Orgueilleuse. Further west, the 50th (Northumbrian) Division was struggling to clear the very large area it had captured on D-Day of pockets of German troops and to secure Bayeux. Consequently, while the rest of the *Hitlerjugend*’s columns dashed from cover to cover to avoid the ‘Jabos’,[1] which made a mockery of the tightly-timed movement tables, it was only the advanced elements of the Recce Battalion that clashed with British patrols in the Audrieu-St Léger area.

While it was clear to SS *Brigadeführer* Fritz Witt and his staff that his division’s movement was almost slowed to the point of paralysis during the daylight hours of the 7th, the situation was far from clearly understood by the various headquarters right up to von Rundstedt’s. The problem was one of communication. So successful had the French Resistance attacks on telephone lines been, that, for instance, General Marks’ LXXXIV Corps at St Lô had been unable to speak to the Seventh Army for most of the day. As a

result, incorrect assumptions were circulating: for instance, at 2145 hours on the 7th, the Seventh Army reported to Army Group B that ‘According to messages received, I SS Panzer Corps with 21 Pz Div and 12 SS Pz Div commenced an attack in a northerly direction at 1600 hours.’ Only later was it realized that this was a significant exaggeration of Kurt ‘Panzer’ Meyer’s action north of Caen and that a full-blown counter-attack could only happen the following day.[2]

The orders for the concentrated attack north, issued by I SS Panzer Corps during the night of 7/8 June to the three panzer divisions, were unrealistic and demonstrates that they were also lacking correct information on which to base their plans. They had no accurate intelligence on the line reached by the enemy and even the locations of their own troops! This, as we will see, led to elements of the much-delayed *Panzer Lehr* being directed onto the same ground as the *Hitlerjugend*.[3] An additional factor was that after Dietrich’s orders had been given and the fighting on 8 June was under way, receipt of information from captured documents saw *Panzer Lehr* being directed further west to Bayeux. This led to what General Geyr von Schweppenburg described as an ‘unclenching of the fist’; in other words, dissipation of effort. *Panzer Lehr* was no longer to take part in the joint strike north to Courseulles, which would split the 50th Division from the Canadians in the centre of the British Second Army’s beachhead. Worse still, the 21st Panzer Division was locked in a defensive battle and would again not be able to take the offensive during 8 June. As far as the *Hitlerjugend* were concerned, this left a 3-mile gap between the 25th *Panzergrenadiers* north-west of Caen and the 26th who would attack from Norrey westward. Once again, the division would be taking the offensive with just a single regiment, with the Recce Battalion covering their left flank.

Sd.Kfz.250 reconnaissance half-tracks pass a victim of Allied air attack. Rommel's views that massed armour could not operate if the Allies had air superiority were being justified.

Obersturmbannführer Wilhelm Mohnke's 26th *Panzergrenadier* Regiment had some 120 miles to march from its positions on the night of 5/6 June near the Seine. They had grouped with them the eighteen towed 105mm guns of II Battalion of the 12th SS Artillery Regiment. Mohnke's plan, based on information from the Recce Battalion's patrols, was that his two dismounted battalions would begin the attack before dawn by taking the villages Norrey and Putot. III Battalion, the division's armoured infantry battalion, would be on the left covering the gap between the 26th and the Recce Battalion and would be prepared to exploit success. *Sturmbannführer* Jurgenson's I Battalion, the 12th SS Panzer Regiment had been ordered to support the attack, but due to a lack of fuel deliveries overnight the Panthers were not able to resume their march until 0930 hours and missed the attack. The extent to which the *Hitlerjugend* and *Panzer Lehr* were delayed by Allied air operations and the consequential lack of punch in I SS Panzer Corp's attacks is hard to overstate. Allied operations were preventing them from fighting the battle that they had planned!

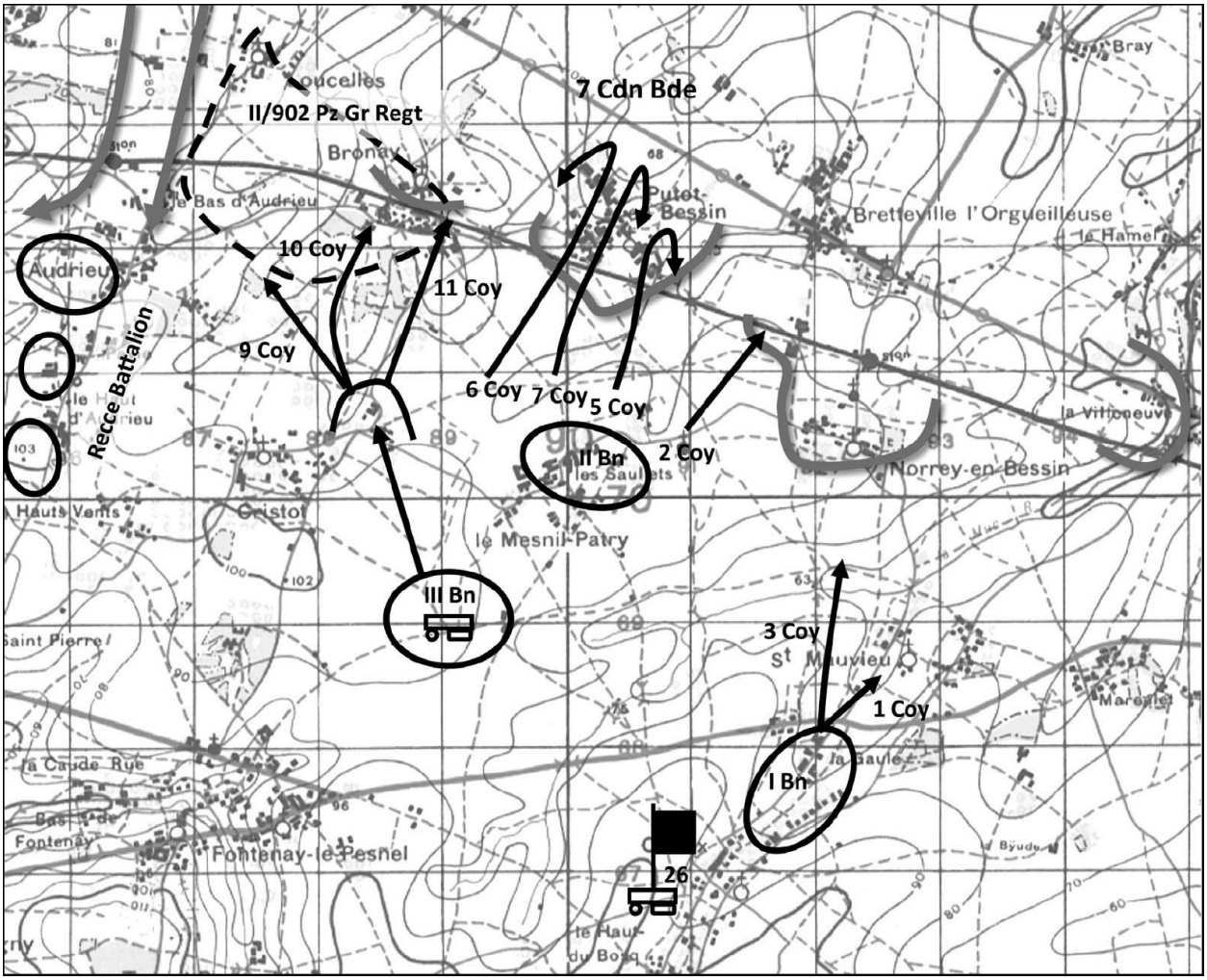
Obersturmbannführer Wilhelm Mohnke.

One of the division's soft-skinned vehicles knocked out during the march to the front. Throughout the battle only 6 per cent of armoured vehicle casualties were inflicted by Allied aircraft.

The Attack of the 26th *Panzergrenadiers*

With II Battalion delayed crossing the River Odon, *Obersturmbannführer* Krause's I Battalion began its attack on Norrey on its own with the 2nd and 3rd companies advancing out of the Mue valley at 0300 hours. The 1st Company had the dual responsibilities of providing the reserve and covering the right flank because of the gap between the two regiments. The battalion plan was to envelop Norrey with attacks from different directions. There was little hope of achieving surprise as the Regina Rifles reported armoured vehicles moving to their front at an early hour. The 3rd Company had further to advance, started forward first but quickly ran into a Canadian outpost south of St Manvieu. The Canadians withdrew into the village and the company

under cover of dawn and the orchards bypassed them to the west. As they climbed the slope out of the broad Mue valley, however, the infantrymen came under accurate and sustained artillery fire, but were unable to call for their own smoke and high explosive in response as a Canadian unit was working on the same radio frequency with a stronger signal. Consequently, they remained effectively neutralized, unable to advance the final 1,000 yards to Norrey.



The initial attack of the 26th *Panzergrenadier* Regiment on 8 June.

The 2nd Company had, meanwhile, in its attempt to envelop Norrey to the west, almost reached the railway but their leading platoon was pinned down by fire from Cardonville Farm just north of the railway line. The rear two platoons were, however, able to manoeuvre, assault and capture some

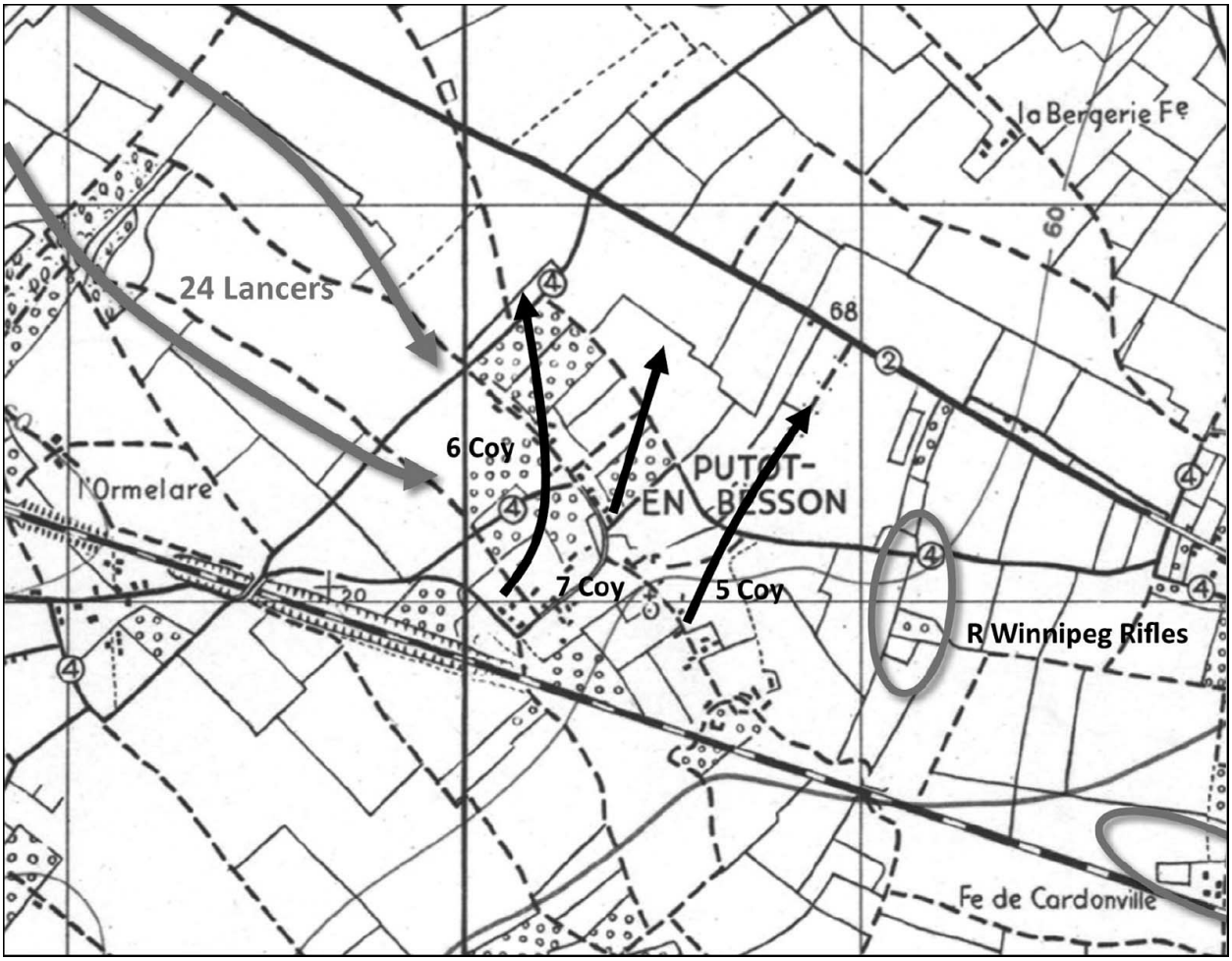
buildings on the south side of the lines. They were prevented from attacking the farm by the remnants of the Canadian company who called down artillery fire on their own positions. As the 2nd Company was effectively on its own and with the Canadians in position the other side of the railway, *Obersturmbannführer* Krause ordered the company to halt and dig in. Days later fifty-nine German bodies were buried in a mass grave across the road from the gate to Cardonville Farm. This represents about 25 per cent losses to that company.

The 1st Company, moving up on the right, cleared the bypassed Canadians from St Manvieu but emerging on the northern outskirts of the village, out into the open as the 3rd Company had been, they were driven to ground and were unable to get forward. Any attempt to cross the open agricultural plain north towards Norrey was heavily engaged by Canadian artillery and mortars. Consequently Norrey, though bombarded, remained securely in Canadian hands and II Battalion frustrated.

Sturmbannführer Bernhard Siebken, commander of II Battalion, 26th *Panzergrenadiers*.

Further to the west, *Sturmbannführer* Siebken's II Battalion had as its initial objective the Canadian-held village of Putot. They began their delayed advance in daylight at 0630 hours, covered across the open ground by artillery and smoke. The 15th (Recce) Company was leading in order to test the enemy's reaction and it wasn't long in coming. As they attempted to cross the railway line they came under fire and it was abundantly clear that the village was strongly held. As the rest of the battalion prepared to attack, they received some unexpected help when they came across a misdirected platoon

of *Panzer Lehr*'s grenadiers who volunteered to join the 6th Company in the assault; not only that, an artillery observation party from the same division provided an additional battery's worth of fire support.



The situation around Putot: the afternoon of 8 June.

The typically open country south of Putot across which the 26th *Panzergrenadiers* attacked on 8 June 1944. The village of Cristot is a mile distant.

The Canadians in Putot resisted strongly and once across the railway line, II Battalion was only gradually able to infiltrate into the village, where they set about isolating the three enemy companies that were holding it. Fighting in and around the houses and farms was intense, but without reinforcement, by mid-afternoon, having suffered very heavy casualties and running low on ammunition, the Canadians abandoned Putot. They attempted to fall back under cover of smoke to their fourth company, located to the east of the village. Few of them made it and the *Hitlerjugend* rounded up some sixty Canadian prisoners, mainly from the Royal Winnipeg Rifles.

Following the post-attack reorganization, II Battalion prepared to resume its advance north. Initially this would be across 500–600 yards of country towards the N13 and then on to their next objective village of Secqueville, which lay a mile beyond the road. As the 6th Company on the left began moving forward through the orchards, they reported being attacked by eighteen tanks. These were the leading Shermans of the 24th Lancers, which they report had responded to a request for help from a Canadian officer.[4] They drove into the orchards and paddocks to the north-west of Putot and were clearly at close quarters with the *panzergrenadiers*, who had no means of knocking out the tanks, but equally the Lancers had no infantry support to

either clear the enemy in detail or to hold ground.

The Lancers' war diary records what happened:

> A particularly active enemy position was found at PUTOT-EN-BESSIN and in the late afternoon the Regiment advanced and attacked this position. The position was found to be strongly held by three battalions of a *panzer-grenadier* regiment of the *Hitlerjugend* Division, numbers of whose infantry had hidden themselves in the long grass in the orchards west of PUTOT and also at the tops of trees whence tank commanders were continually sniped. After inflicting heavy casualties and taking approximately forty prisoners the Regiment withdrew from this position and later were ordered to concentrate again in the MARTRAGNY area.

The Lancers' withdrawal was probably prompted by the arrival of the *Hitlerjugend*'s anti-tank guns and an armoured patrol from the Recce Battalion. What the Lancers do not mention is that in an exchange of fire with the anti-tank guns they scored some hits but also suffered some losses in men and tanks before they fell back. *Oberscharführer* Dargel recorded: 'Half an hour later our armoured reconnaissance vehicles arrived from the direction of Putot. The enemy tanks probably mistook them for panzers and withdrew. Afterwards, I met four of my men without their helmets and belts. They had escaped from captivity.'

The intervention of the British tanks, while not restoring the situation at Putot had checked the advance of the II/26th *Panzergrenadiers*, who in the late afternoon dug in among the trees of the orchards and on the northern extremity of the village.

To the west, *Sturmbannführer* Olböter's III Armoured Battalion had arrived at Fontenay-le-Pesnel overnight and marched on foot the 2 miles to the group of farms at Le Hamel to the north-east of Cristot. Their SPWs were left at Fontenay, less the six 75mm guns mounted on Sd.Kfz.251s that would provide close support.[5] They only advanced to join the battle at 0800 hours when it became apparent to Mohnke that neither I nor II Battalions had quickly or cleanly broken through the Canadian line and that there was no immediate necessity to retain a company for exploitation. He was also

informed of a significant gap between his left flank and the right of the Recce Battalion, but he was still unaware that elements of the 902nd *Panzergrenadier* Regiment (*Panzer Lehr*) had already been deployed in this area, thanks to the lack of clarity over the divisional boundary.

Operations did not get off to a good start when Olböter's orders group in Le Hamel was struck by shellfire. All three company commanders were wounded, of whom one managed to remain with his soldiers.

Olböter's orders were to extend the regiment's attack frontage by taking on the village of Brouay,[6] which was believed to be held by a detachment of the British 50th Division. As they advanced, III Battalion encountered elements of II/902nd *Panzergrenadiers* in the thicker country through which they were moving. Inevitably there were incidents of fratricide as the 10th and 11th companies came up behind their comrades. In one instance they arrived to within 150 yards of Brouay before spotting what they took to be the enemy troops on the outskirts of the village. They were in fact II/902nd *Lehr* Grenadiers, who were engaging British tanks to their front and were now attacked by the 11th Company from behind! To add insult to injury, the 12th SS Artillery Regiment joined in the fratricide. Eventually, the error was realized as III Battalion entered Brouay, after which the *panzergrenadiers* of both divisions cleared its southern half. They took up positions along the railway, with the Canadians again on the northern side of the tracks.

Infantry Gun Companies and Platoons

Traditionally German infantry had their own organic artillery support; in the case of the *Hitlerjugend* this was at both regimental and battalion level.

The 13th Heavy Company of both *panzergrenadier* regiments consisted of a battery of six 150mm sIG 33 guns. For an infantry gun they were heavy, but their short range was not a disadvantage for their close support role.

A sIG 33 gun.

At battalion level, in four of the division's six heavy companies, the weapons were the lighter 75mm infantry guns.

A 75mm infantry gun.

II/26 SS *Panzergrenadiers* were issued with Russian 76.2mm (model 1927/39) Regimental Cannon. Large numbers of which had been captured in 1941. They were a

very good gun and similar to their own gun in performance and the Germans produced ammunition for them. In March 1944 some 225 were still in Wehrmacht service.

The Russian 76.2mm gun.

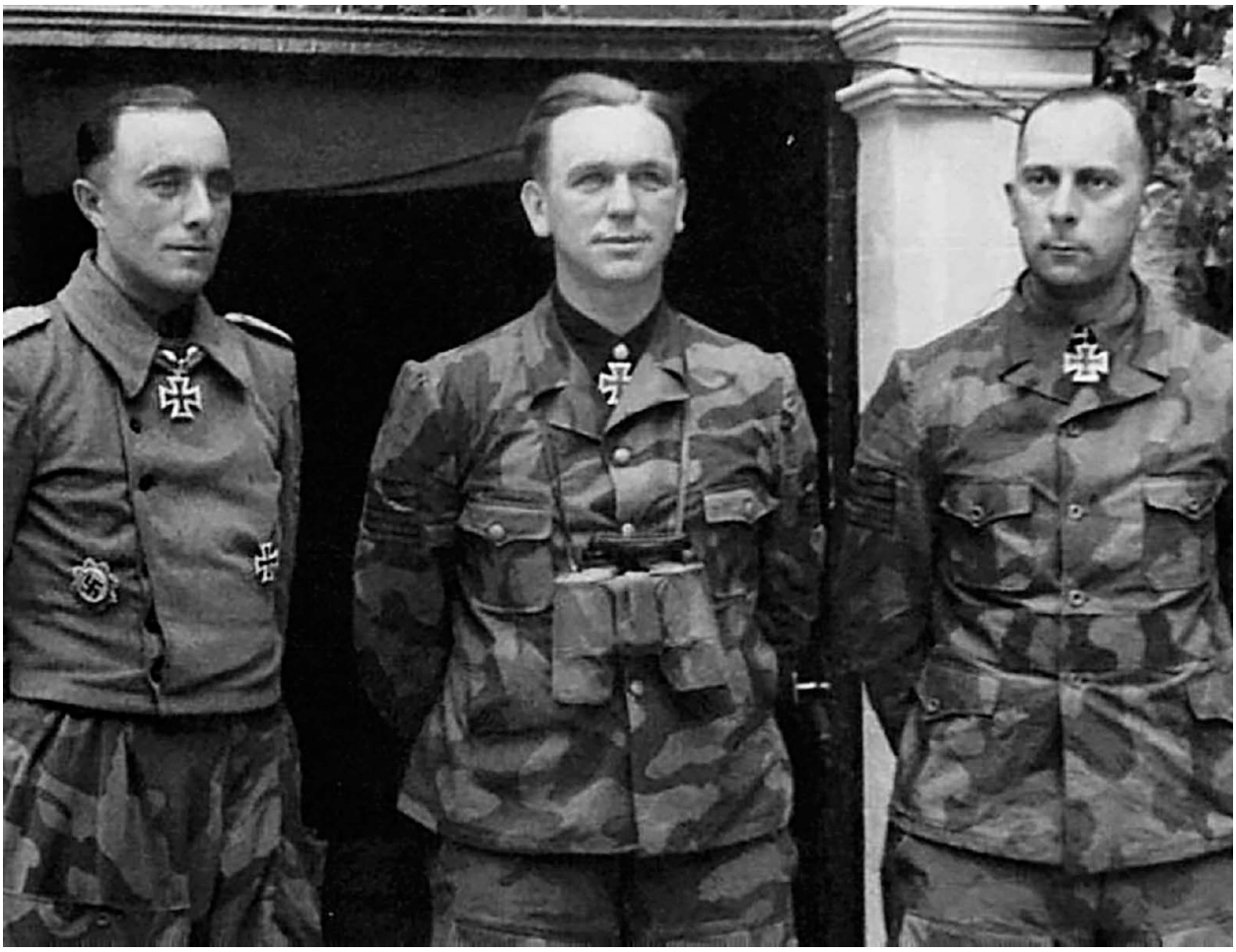
The armoured battalion had a platoon of six 75mm L/24 ‘Stummel’ guns, mounted in the Sd.Kfz.251/9 armoured half-track in the 12th (Heavy) Company, plus a section of two in each armoured infantry company, giving a total of twelve guns.

An early version of ‘Hanomag’ mounting the 75mm ‘Stummel’ as issued to the *Hitlerjugend*.

Meanwhile, the 10th Company had been advancing through the woods near Château de Brouay, where *Oberscharführer* Kesslar came on the aftermath of a naval gunfire strike: ‘The enemy had virtually cut to pieces units of *Panzer Lehr* with heavy artillery. The SPWs and equipment had been ripped apart and next to them lay pieces of our comrades. Others hung from the trees. A dreadful silence covered all.’

During the day an Auster air observation post aircraft[7] was active over the Putot-Brouay area calling for fire from the medium guns of XXX Corps’ Army Group Royal Artillery (AGRA) and naval gunfire.[8] For the German soldier fighting in Normandy, a second reality, alongside Allied air power, was very quickly apparent: the crushing weight of their enemy’s artillery, both naval and land-based.

The 10th Company, with the 75mm guns in support, moved on to join the 11th in Brouay. The 9th Company remained in reserve for the time being, but when it was realized later in the afternoon that enemy tanks had crossed the railway line into Le Bas d’Audrieu, they were deployed to the orchards and woods to the south-west of Brouay to form a defensive flank.



Senior *HJ* officers Olböter, Kurt Meyer and Wilhelm Mohnke. All wear German-pattern uniforms made up from Italian camouflage material.

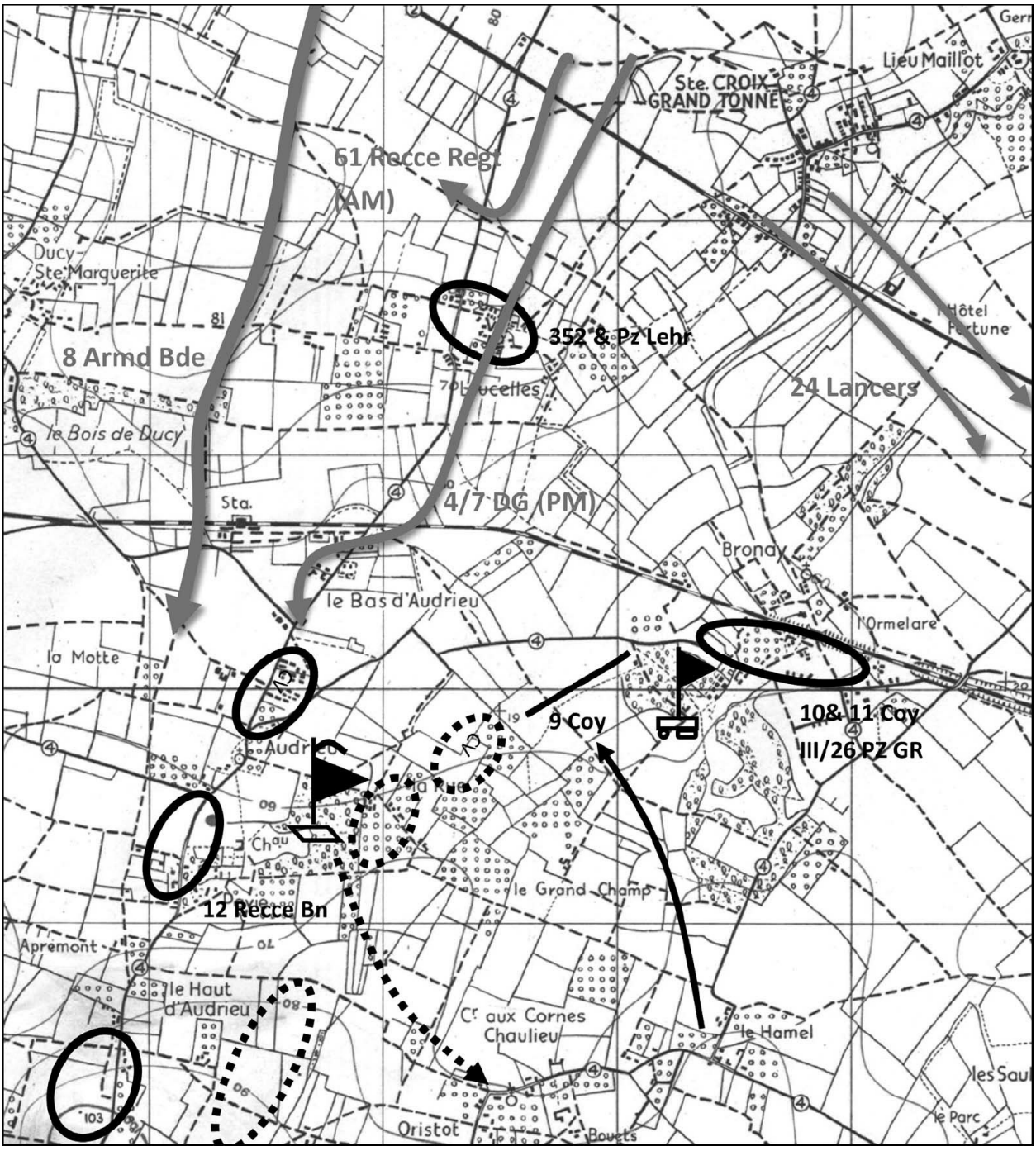
The Recce Battalion

The difficulties on the division's left flank were mainly the result of contradictory orders and poor communication. *Panzer Lehr*'s Recce Battalion, whose task was to screen its division's deployment, thought that the *Hitlerjugend*'s Recce Battalion would be facing north and extended west to the Seulles River. No such orders had, however, been given and there was, consequently, a gap between the two Recce Battalions. *Sturmbannführer* Gerhard Bremer had in fact been ordered to form a defensive flank, covering west, on the Le Bas d'Audrieu-St Pierre road and to continue patrolling north as they had done the previous day. With the last of his companies arriving during the night, Bremer completed the deployment of the battalion during the morning of 8 June and established his headquarters well forward in the

Château d'Audrieu.

Bremer dispatched patrols to the village of Loucelles, to the north of the railway, where they found troops from *Panzer Lehr* and the remnants of the 352nd Division, who together initially rebuffed the British 61st Recce Regiment during the morning before being forced back over the railway line in the afternoon by tanks and infantry. The 8th British Armoured Brigade, however, being aware of the resistance on the railway south of Loucelles, took an uncontested route south to Point 103; i.e. through the gap left by the contradictory orders. With the enemy in Le Bas d'Audrieu on his flank and pushing south, Bremer was forced to withdraw the Recce Battalion 500–1,000 yards into line with the 9th Company of the 26th *Panzergrenadiers* and re-establish his headquarters in Cristot.

A Sd.Kfz.231/232 armoured car found in 1st Company in the Recce Battalion. This picture was taken when it first arrived with the battalion in Belgium.



The left flank on 8 June 1944.

During the course of the day armoured car patrols belonging to the Inns of Court Yeomanry on a mission to blow the Orne bridges slipped through the Recce Battalion's positions between Brouay and Loucelles. In due course the British stumbled on a group of officers and gunners belonging to the *Panzer Lehr*'s artillery regiment and took them prisoner. According to *Hauptmann*

Graf Clary, *Oberst* Luxenburger was beaten and tied to an armoured car, while other prisoners were machine-gunned as the armoured cars drove away. While attempting to get back to their own lines, the armoured car with Luxenburger aboard was knocked out and the *Oberst* released by soldiers of the *Hitlerjugend*'s Recce Battalion. They clearly believed that Luxenburger was being used as a human shield rather than being secured externally in the only place an armoured car has for prisoners. Having also received information on the machine-gunning of prisoners from *Graf* Clary, who had reached the headquarters of II Battalion, 26th *Panzer-grenadiers*, reprisals were carried out, with three Canadian prisoners being shot at Le Mesnil-Patry that evening or on the following day.

Execution of Prisoners: 8 June 1944

During 8 June a considerable number of prisoners were taken and around a hundred were executed that day on the insistence of Mohnke, who had already murdered prisoners in incidents dating back to 1940 at Wormhout. Approximately sixty prisoners, mainly Canadians from the Winnipeg Rifles taken in Putot and two British soldiers, had been escorted to Château d'Audrieu, the headquarters of the *Hitlerjugend*'s Recce Battalion, presumably because Bremer could speak fluent English. He was personally questioning the prisoners and when he was finished with them, he sent them over to *Scharführer* Stunn who was to oversee their executions. The first batch of prisoners were shot in the back of the neck, but two of the next group turned just before they were shot to stare their executioners in the face, which greatly upset the young SS troopers. Consequently, the next three Canadians were ordered to lie on the ground and were shot in the back of the head. In all some forty prisoners were executed in this manner. However, when a very heavy bombardment fell on the château area, heralding the renewed advance of the 8th Armoured Brigade, the remaining twenty-seven prisoners were simply machine-gunned. Due to the pressure they were under, the Recce Battalion withdrew from the area of the château before they had the opportunity to conceal their crime. When the British advanced past the château the following day, Major Bredin of the 2nd Dorsets was shown the Canadian bodies by Monique Level, the daughter of the château's owner. He

wrote: ‘We saw them with our own eyes laid out in rows behind the château …’

Further prisoners were held by II Battalion at Le Mesnil-Patry who were again ordered to be shot by Mohnke. A German signaller at the battalion telephone exchange listened in to *Sturmbannführer* Siebken and a sergeant disputing these orders and checking with divisional headquarters that this was a specific order. In the event forty were lined up in groups to be shot. Five of them escaped, but were recaptured and lived to tell the tale and testify. Siebken and the sergeant were both found guilty of war crimes and executed, but Mohnke lived into his old age, having survived as a Russian prisoner of war.

During Kurt Meyer’s war crimes trial, in his final pre-sentence statement to the Canadian court, having been found guilty he said:

> I have here, during these proceedings, been given an insight into things which, in the aggregate, were unknown to me up to now. I wish to state to the court here that these deeds were not committed by the young soldiers. I am convinced of it, that in the division there were elements who, due to the year-long battles, due to five years of war, had in a certain respect become brutalized.

Château d'Audrieu.

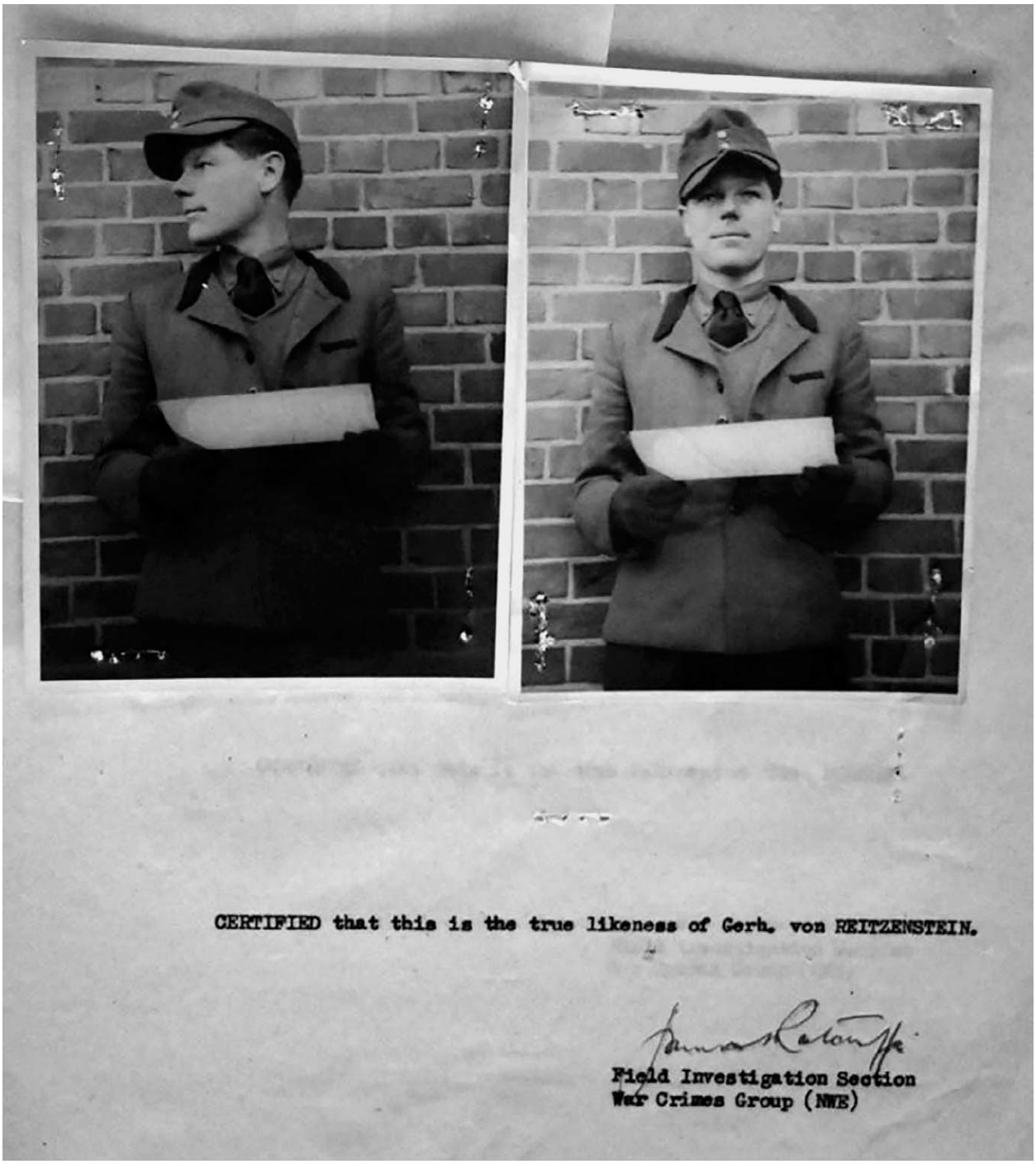
In total, between 150 and 156 Canadians were murdered during the early days of the Battle of Normandy, this figure being 1 in 7 of all Canadian fatalities. In his personal account Kurt Meyer put the other side of the story:

> On 7 June, a notebook was found on a Canadian captain with notes about the orders given before the invasion. Besides the tactical instructions, there were also instructions on how to fight. It read: 'No prisoners are to be taken.' The notebook was given to the Commander-in-Chief of the Seventh Army, *Generaloberst* Dollmann, by the Operations Officer of the 12th SS Panzer Division on 8 June. The officers and men of the Canadian 3rd Division, who were interrogated by the 12th SS Panzer Division, confirmed they had received orders from their superiors not to take any prisoners. A soldier stated that they were not supposed to take prisoners if they were hindering operations.

Executions were eventually stopped, but for some time this did not prevent the casual battlefield killing of prisoners at the point of capture by both sides. Eventually, it was realized that the killing of prisoners benefited no-one and was officially frowned upon but was never entirely stamped out.

Canadian Counter-Attack

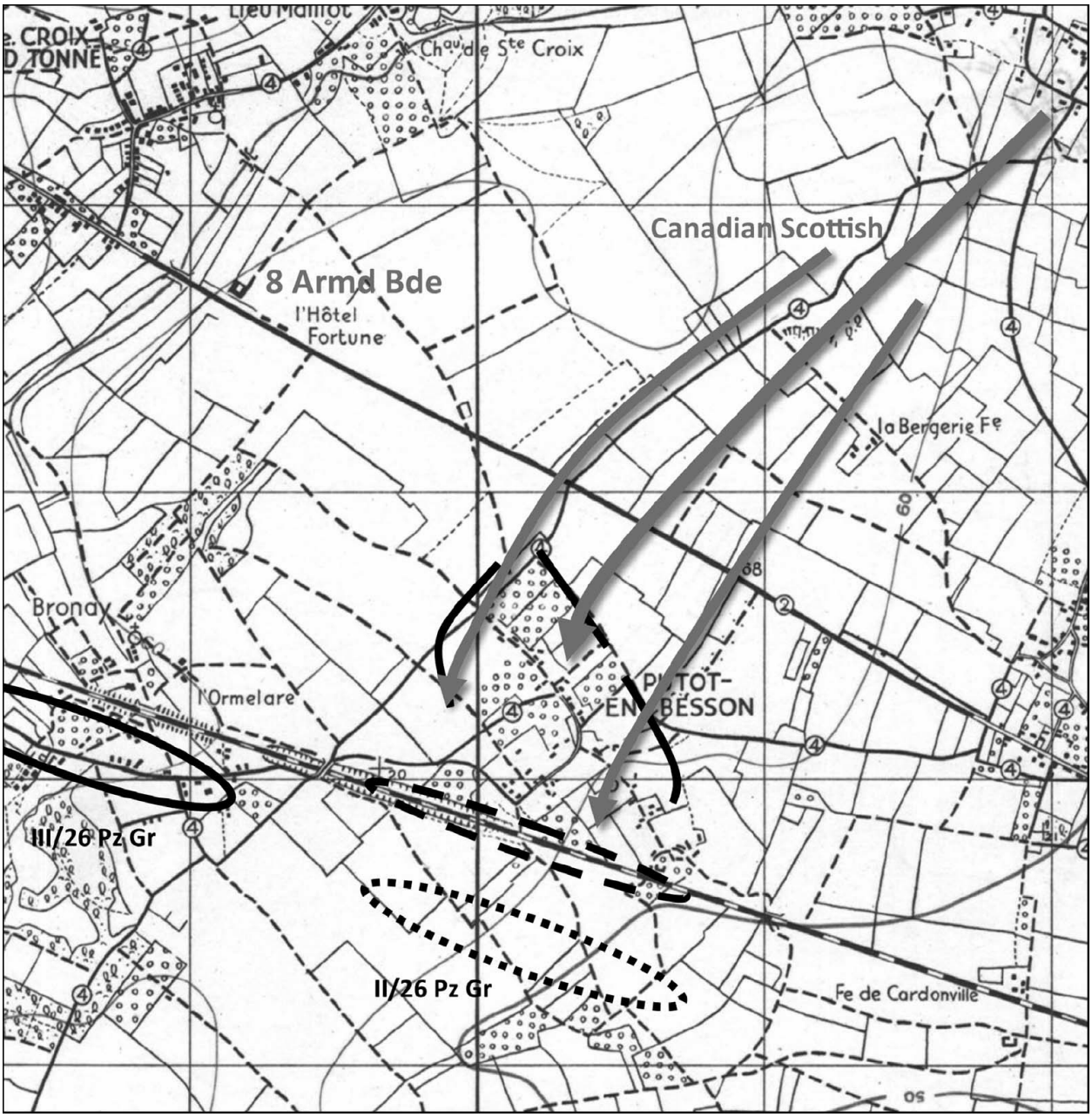
Following the loss of Putot on 8 June, the 9th Canadian Brigade was ordered to recapture the village. H-hour for the attack was to be 2030 and it was to be carried out by the Canadian Scottish, supported by tanks, machine guns and mortars, plus forty-eight 105mm guns of the divisional artillery,[9] plus guns of the AGRA. Already reduced by the fighting to take the village and the attack by the 24th Lancers, and now the fearsome weight of the Allied bombardment and creeping barrage, II Battalion fell back to the railway line. Here they held their ground until ordered to fall back a further 200 yards and dig in.



An identity photograph of *Hauptsturmführer* von Reitzenstein who was investigated for participation in the war crimes committed at Château d'Audrieu.

The 8th ended with the 26th *Panzergrenadiers* having made little impression on the Canadians who were already consolidated along Line OAK (the railway line) the previous day. The attack by a single regiment, poorly coordinated with *Panzer Lehr*, had certainly not been the opening of a drive

to the coast, but it had contributed to reducing the advance of the 8th Armoured Brigade to just 3 miles to the northern outskirts of Audrieu.



The Canadian counter-attack on Putot, evening of 8 June 1944.

Night Attack on Bretteville

SS *Brigadeführer* Fritz Witt, however, was not prepared to let matters rest; he ordered a renewed attack by a *Kampfgruppe* of divisional units, chief of which were two companies, totalling twenty-five Panthers from

Sturmbannführer Jurgenson's I Battalion, 12th SS Panzer Regiment. *Standartenführer* Kurt 'Panzer' Meyer was to command the operation:

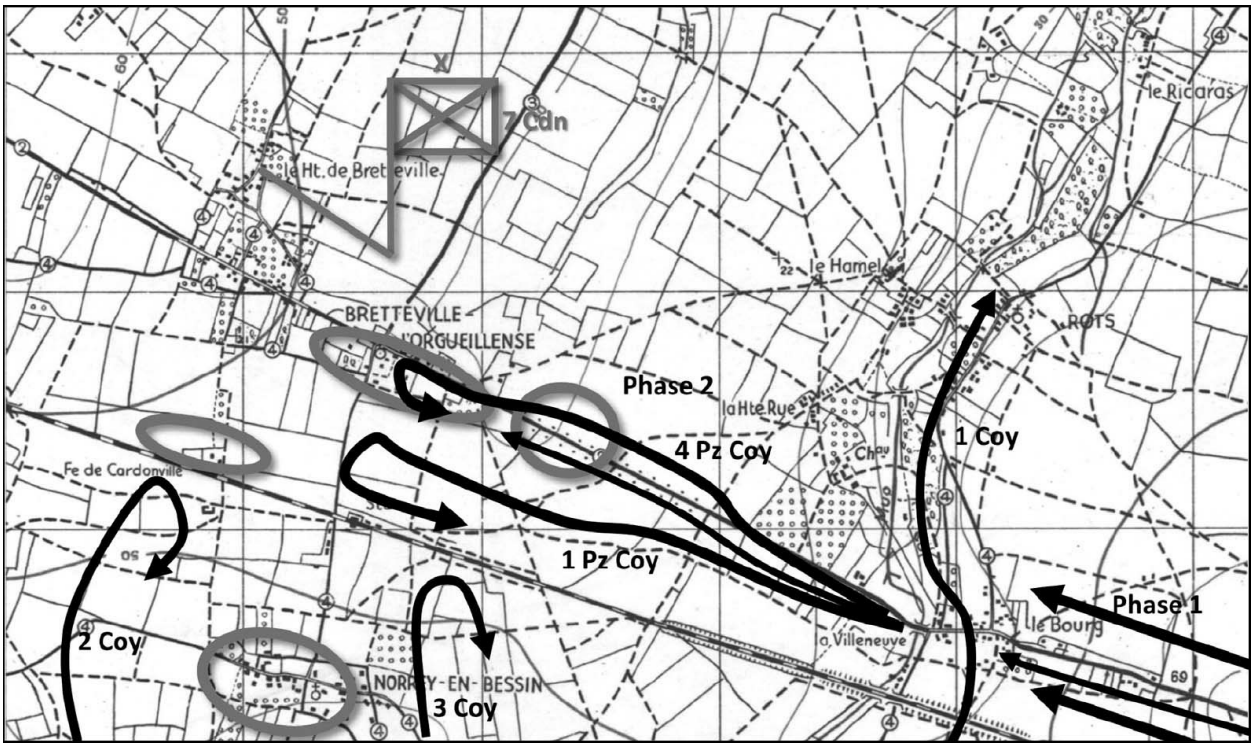
> On the afternoon of 8 June, I made a trip around the regimental sector with the divisional commander, afterwards visiting the I/26 SS-*Panzergrenadier* Regiment. Low-flying aircraft were on our tail. I was glad to bring the commander back to my command post in one piece. I then received orders to relieve the pressure on the I/26 SS-*Panzergrenadier* Regiment by attacking Bretteville l'Orgueilleuse from the east [and to create conditions for the resumption of Mohnke's advance]. I would be joined in the attack by the recently-arrived Panther company [*sic*] of the I/12th SS-Panzer Regiment and the 15th Recce Company of 25th SS-*Panzergrenadier* Regiment. The attack was planned for that night. Day attacks had become impossible given the Allied air supremacy.

The *Kampfgruppe*'s attack, supported by a battery of 105mm artillery, was to be in two phases. First Rots and La Villeneuve/Le Bourg, which were known to be held by a Canadian company, would have to be cleared in the last of the daylight and, secondly, there would be a quick attack astride the Caen-Bayeux road (N13) into Bretteville to seize the village. Meyer's concept for this attack was based on SS experience in Russia, where the speed and surprise of their blow had been the key to success. Kurt Meyer makes it clear that he arranged for an infantry attack from the south, astride Norrey, over the railway line and into Bretteville by I Battalion, 26th SS *Panzergrenadiers*.

With an hour and a half of daylight left, the initial advance began. The two panzer companies were either side of the road accompanied by Max Wünsche in his command Panther and riding on the engine decks of the panzers were most of the soldiers of the 15th (Recce) Company. The remainder of the company mounted on motorcycles and sidecars were on the road in the centre. Kurt Meyer had been reminded of a promise he made to the young soldiers of the 15th Company that he would accompany them into their first battle:

> My old friend and comrade, Helmut Belke, arrived with a motorcycle combination. He had constantly been by my side as a dispatch rider and

section leader since 1939. He had accompanied me across all the battlefields. In the sidecar was Dr Stift. I jumped on the rear seat and directed Helmut to the Caen-Bayeux road. On our right tank engines were rumbling. The grenadiers had mounted up; they were taking cover behind the turrets. The young soldiers were waving to me … The commander of 12th SS-Panzer-Regiment, Max Wünsche, wanted to accompany the Panther company. He had also been fighting at my side since 1939. We knew each other; there was no need for discussion. A look, a signal, and the tanks were rolling …



Standartenführer Meyer's attack on Bretteville on the night of 8 June 1944.

The 12th SS Reconnaissance Battalion

German reconnaissance battalions in Normandy were not simply the eyes and ears of a formation as they were in Allied service, were expected to fight. As such, they were equipped with a significant amount of heavy equipment and weapons. Because of equipment shortages and new items coming into service, no two recce battalions in panzer divisions were equipped and organized in the same way. Indeed, there were changes to that of the 12th SS Reconnaissance Battalion during the Normandy campaign.

The *Hitlerjugend*'s battalion was superbly equipped and fully up to strength with

almost 1,000 men on 1 June 1944. It consisted of a Battalion Headquarters, 1st Company (armoured cars), 2nd Company (reconnaissance armoured half-tracks), 3rd and 4th Companies (light armoured reconnaissance infantry), 5th Company (heavy support) and Headquarters Company (communications).

In Normandy once the Allied beachhead had been roped off by the Seventh Army, there was little opportunity for recce battalions to perform their specified role and were consequently used as an additional *Kampfgruppe*, often in the 'fire brigade' role. To give the battalion extra punch for specific tasks, panzers were often attached from the panzer regiment.

An Sd.Kfz.232 reconnaissance armoured car with an extended-range radio, as issued to the 1st Company.

An Sd.Kfz.250/9 with a turret mounting a 20mm gun.

The Sd.Kfz.250 could carry a handful of reconnaissance soldiers.

Most of the support weapons were concentrated in the 5th Heavy Company and would be attached to the recce companies as required. They included three towed Pak 40 anti-tank guns, two towed 75mm light infantry guns, six ‘Stummel’ Sd.Kfz.251/9 and six armoured flame-throwers.

Obersturmbannführer Max Wünsche.

From their forming-up point they advanced past an 88mm battery and through the regiment’s outposts. Meyer continued:

> There were no obstacles and the tank drivers could put the pedal to the metal. A motorcycle section and the artillery forward observer's vehicle were following a few hundred metres behind me … The engine was our strongest weapon. The speed increased, only the outline of the tanks could be seen. I wanted to be through Rots [Le Bourg] before nightfall. That was what had been arranged with Wünsche. The first buildings in Rots appeared.

The panzers, which had been advancing in a wedge formation, halted to cover the entry into the village. 'The first section of the reconnaissance company dismounted and moved ahead on the ground. The village was clear of the enemy and we pushed quickly through.' The Canadians had been monitoring the arrival of the panzers east of Rots throughout the day and may even have seen the tank commanders reconnoitring routes for the attack. The defending company was withdrawn to reinforce the farm buildings at Cardonville north of the railway, before the attack began. Consequently, Meyer was lacking a key element of his concept: surprise.

The 1st Company, I Battalion 26th SS *Panzergrenadiers* had already advanced through Le Villeneuve to clear Rots a mile north and was the only company to succeed in its part of the attack and by the time Meyer passed through Le Bourg they were reorganizing and digging in on the northern edge of Rots. The rest of the battalion had attacked in the Cardonville Farm/Norrey area, but as the Regina Rifles recorded in their war diary, they beat off an attack by 'tanks and infantry'. This failure was to be a crucial setback for the attack on Bretteville.

The recce soldiers dismounted and cleared through Le Bourg and Le Villeneuve, finding the bridge over the Mue stream intact. The Panthers drove through the village in single file, keeping behind the grenadiers. Emerging beyond the buildings,

> … as soon as they had the village behind them, they resumed the wedge formation. Two Panthers went roaring down the road towards Bretteville. The rest pushed ahead on both sides of the road. In the darkness, I was only able to see the red-hot exhaust pipes of the panzers.

A Zündapp military motorcycle combination.

The axis of advance into Bretteville.

The report by the 4th Company states:

> Between Le Bourg and Bretteville heavy anti-tank and machine-gun fire from six armoured personnel carriers (small tracked vehicles). The grenadiers suffered losses and dismounted the Panthers. The company advanced without delay to the entrance of Bretteville, where they again met heavy enemy tank, anti-tank and machine-gun fire from the perimeter of the village.

Kurt Meyer, still aboard the motorcycle combination, was following: 'Norrey was already just behind us to the left. We would encounter the Canadian outposts in the next few seconds. Bretteville was only several hundred metres in front of us.'

To cover the entry into the village by the leading Panthers, the rest of the 4th Company opened fire with their main armament, firing high-explosive shells and their machine guns. They were quickly, however, in a fire-fight with at least four Canadian anti-tank guns which were dug in at the edge of the village. *Sturmmann* Kesper wrote:

> My company advanced to the village along the road, the Panzers staggered one behind the other. We of 4 Platoon were on the right side of the road which led to the village. I saw a church straight ahead of me. We were taking heavy anti-tank fire; some houses were in flames. I can still today hear commander Pfeiffer yell: 'Set the houses on fire so that we can see something!' The panzer ahead of me took a direct hit.

Illuminated by parachute flares, the 4th Company's commander, *Hauptsturmführer* Pfeiffer in the third Panther was hit and was blazing. The war diary records that 'Panther 404 discovered an enemy tank at the entrance of the village, opened fire and knocked out a Sherman.' Meanwhile, the 1st Company motored around to the south of Bretteville with the intent of sealing off the village and tying up with the infantry companies of the 1st 26th SS *Panzergrenadiers*, but all they found were more anti-tank guns. Platoon commander *Untersturmführer* Teichert recalled that

> *Hauptsturmführer* Berlin [commander 1st Company] ordered me by to take my platoon around the village to the south and to enter it from the west. A few houses on the southern edge as well as the station were

> burning. To avoid being a target for too long while passing in front of the burning buildings, I ordered the section to move into line and told them to drive as fast as possible towards the protective darkness. Meanwhile, we were under anti-tank fire from the edge of the village as we crossed the danger zone. The panzer on the right brewed up like a torch having probably received a direct hit in the engine compartment; the crew bailed out. Then my tank received a hit on the turret, seriously wounding the loader and knocking out the electrical system. The vehicle to my left also received a hit but was still manoeuvrable. From the latter vehicle I managed to contact *Hauptsturmführer* Berlin by radio who gave me the order to withdraw. We got my loader out and laid him on the rear deck and returned to the road with the two remaining tanks. I saw to it that my loader was taken to hospital and then repaired the electrics of my panzer before reporting to *Hauptsturmführer* Berlin, who ordered me to go to the south of the village and report on the situation.

Back on the main road into the village, Kurt Meyer was watching the break-in:

> The two lead Panthers were firing round after round from their guns and cleared the road with their fire, then roared into the village at top speed. That was the way we had fought in the east, but would these surprise tactics achieve the same for us in Normandy?

While the Canadian company east of the village was overrun by the dismounted soldiers of the 15th Company, helped by the Panther's fire, the Canadian defence in Bretteville did not collapse as Meyer and Wünsche had hoped. Meyer was himself having difficulty in reaching the village:

> We had positioned ourselves right behind the second Panther. It was getting too uncomfortable on the road for my liking. We moved to the right and worked our way forward along a ditch and I tripped over a dead Canadian. A small armoured carrier was smoking along the road embankment. As we moved on, I heard somebody groaning. A wounded man was on the road over to our left; machine-gun bursts were ripping down the street. Additional Panthers with *panzergrenadiers* mounted on

them were pushing into the village.

Casualties were mounting, including the driver of Meyer's motorcycle, his old comrade Helmut Belke and the recce company commander *Hauptsturmführer* von Büntner. Meyer mounted his motorcycle to catch up with the assault, but the fuel tank was hit and he was enveloped in flames. Fortunately, some of his soldiers were on hand to extinguish the fire without their commander suffering more than a singeing.

A panzer of the 1st Company knocked out south of the village.

The panzers and the infantry of both sides in the village, their night vision ruined by the flash of tank guns and the explosion of shells, struggled to see what was going on in a battle that lasted hours, not minutes. After several attacks, with Panthers and German infantry at the crossroads in the centre of the village and with the Reginas' battalion headquarters under threat, Canadians in the shadows armed in one instance with a Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank (PIAT) stood their ground amid the chaos of battle. Meyer recalled:

> There was firing from all directions in the village. We had reached the centre, but the lead tank had been hit. The command post of the Regina Rifles had been overrun. The surprise attack was successful, but where were the soldiers of 26 SS *Panzergrenadier* Regiment? We could not hold out there on our own, and we were not strong enough to capture all of Bretteville. With heavy heart I decided to withdraw the units at dawn to the high ground east of Rots.

With no *panzergrenadiers* to be found south of the village, Max Wünsche had come to the same conclusion and ordered his Panthers to fall back. Another panzer platoon commander, *Untersturmführer* Chemnitz, recalled the withdrawal:

> The panzers returned from the attack. As the road there was embanked, I had to guide the drivers where to get on to it. Behind me on the right was Wünsche. At that moment a Canadian fired at our leading vehicle and Wünsche was slightly wounded in the head by a shell burst. I received a shower of splinters around my feet, but Nehrlich was seriously injured, and in spite of being put into a sidecar to take him to the field hospital, was dead on arrival.

Photographed after the battle, one of the *Hitlerjugend*'s Panthers knocked out in Bretteville.

Making up the grave after the burial of *Obersharführer* Helmut Belke at the Abbey d'Ardenne. He drove Kurt Meyer during the attack on Bretteville.

The attack had been a costly failure: Meyer had arguably sacrificed coordination for speed and the vain hope of achieving surprise. The independently-minded and resilient Canadian infantry were able to hold their own, but without the I/26th being able to get across the railway from the south, Meyer was chronically short of infantry in Bretteville. The panzers could provide the shock action, but without infantry it was impossible to clear and hold a village. Yet, as one Canadian officer said, 'The Germans thought they were fighting the ******* Russians and we killed a lot of them'; i.e. they could not get away with hasty attacks against well-trained, dug-in and equipped Allied soldiers in the same way that they had on the Eastern Front. It is clear that both sides were learning how to fight this battle.

Breteville after the battle, with Canadians examining one of the knocked out Panthers.

Chapter Four

Attack and Defence

For the *Hitlerjugend* the events of 9-10 June 1944 marked the beginning of a period of settling down into holding ground. Tactically, the rehearsed counterattacks had failed to throw the Allies back into the sea, but the German command in the west had certainly not given up on the idea of a major counterstroke. Strategically, the Allied deception, Operation FORTITUDE, was still highly successfully painting up a picture of General Patton's fictitious First US Army Group being poised to land in the Pas-de-Calais. A message recorded in Army Group B's war diary stated: 'The Supreme commander of the Wehrmacht [Hitler] believes they have reliable information [from the double agent 'Garbo' and an intercepted radio message] of an assault planned for the morning of 10 June and has issued orders accordingly.'

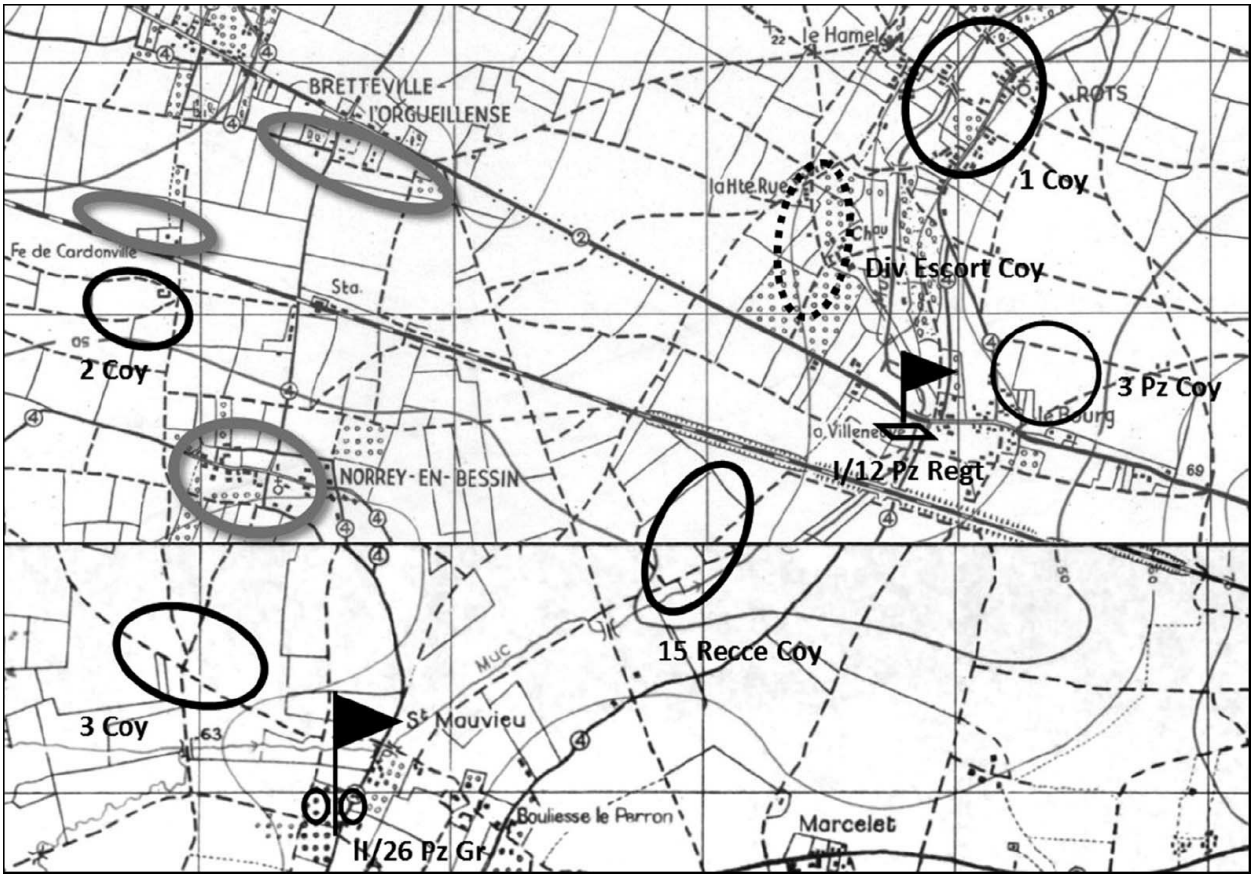
Further attempts by the 21st and 12th SS Panzer divisions to drive to the sea were suspended, but *Panzer Lehr*, on the *Hitlerjugend*'s left, continued its attacks towards Bayeux and Fritz Witt wanted to secure starting-points for future attacks.

The Panzer Attack on Norrey: 9 June 1944

While major operations were suspended, the 3rd Panzer Company, which arrived too late to take part in the previous evening's attack, took part in an assault on Norrey on 9 June. General Geyr von Schweppenburg visited Headquarters 25th SS *Panzergrenadiers* in the Abbey d'Ardenne shortly after dawn that day. There he discussed the resumption of the offensive with *Standartenführer* Meyer who, based on the previous night's experience,

believed that the Canadian bastion position in the village of Norrey had to be cleared as a preliminary operation.

Orders were given in Rots, but the commander of the panzer company, *Hauptsturmführer* Rudolf von Ribbentrop, who had been wounded during an air attack prior to D-Day, still had his arm in a sling. Consequently, he was unable to command the attack and the company was, therefore, led in his place by an army officer, *Hauptmann* Lüdemann. The twelve panzers, along with a twenty-strong platoon of infantry from the 1st Company in Rots, were to advance on Norrey from the east. The Panthers of the 4th Company were in overwatch to secure the right flank to the north of the railway and the 1st Panzer Company, on the left, was to advance from the cover of the Mue valley and provide fire support. Two companies of I/25 *Panzergrenadiers* were to repeat their attack on Norrey from the south. The move into the various forming-up points was at 1230 hours, at which time only a few days into the campaign it had been noticed that enemy air activity was at its minimum. H-hour for the attack was 1440.



The situation between Rots and Bretteville on the morning of 9 June 1944.

Max Wünsche, having just returned from getting his head wound dressed, drove the wounded *Hauptsturmführer* Ribbentrop from Rots to the forming-up point for the attack on Bretteville.

The 3rd Company's Panthers drove from their assembly area east of Rots, through a railway underpass and turned west parallel to the railway line. They formed up behind the 15th Recce Company in what was dead ground to the enemy in Norrey. *Hauptsturmführer* von Ribbentrop[1] gave Lüdemann orders to cross the 1,000 yards of open ground to Norrey as quickly as possible, halting only to fire their main armament at the enemy if necessary. He also expressed concern about the open right flank. The company formed up with two panzer platoons forward with the third in reserve.

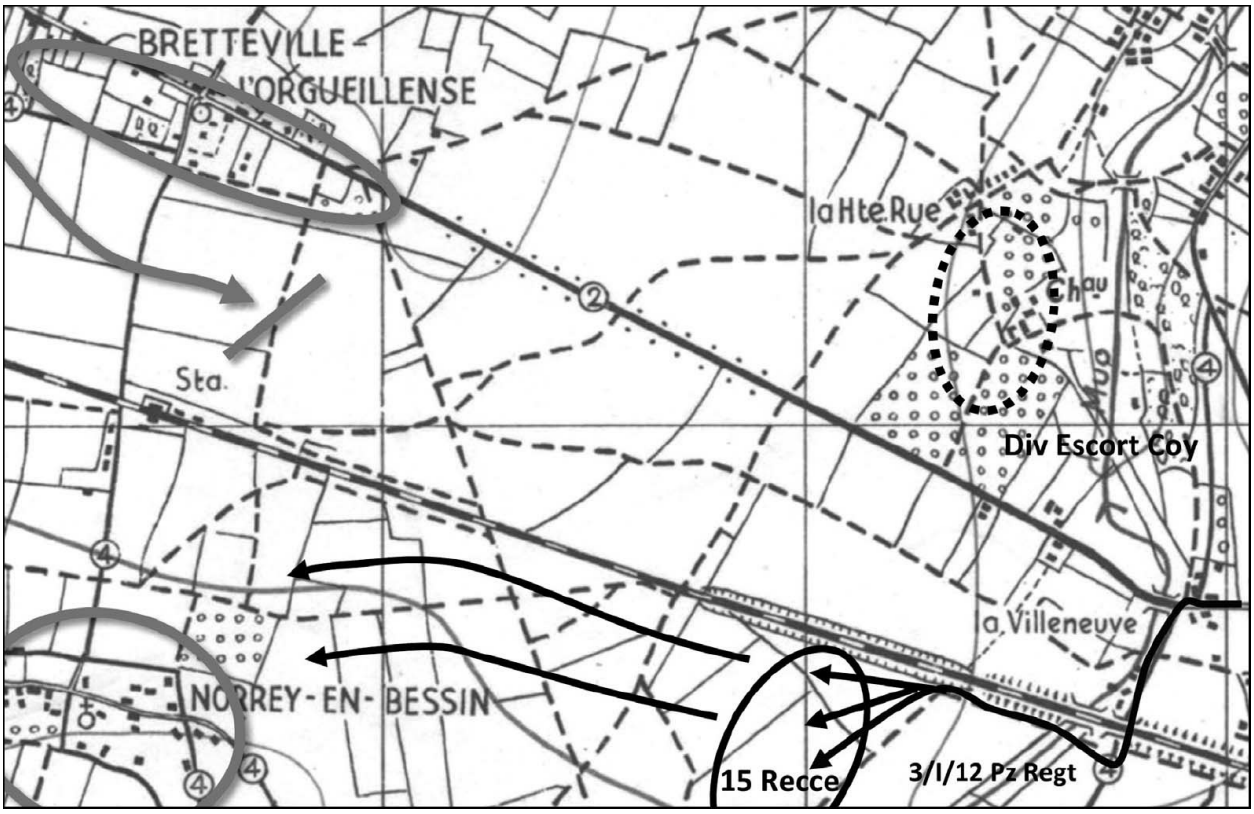
The advance started well with the 3rd Company moving tactically using such cover, folds in the ground and hedges as were available, but the *panzergrenadiers* following on foot were soon left behind. Meanwhile, as

recorded in the battalion's war diary, 1st Company Panzer had emerged to give fire support: 'From a position hidden behind a hill, all tank guns opened fire at the church tower, because it was probable that an artillery observer was located there. They had driven with utmost speed towards Norrey. Two anti-tank guns and infantry positions were destroyed.'

One of these 'destroyed' anti-tank guns was in fact still serviceable and brought into action by the section sergeant who fired three rounds of the newly-issued armour-piercing discarding sabot (APDS) at the Panthers. These all missed as he had not been told that with this round it was not necessary to 'lead' a moving target due to its high velocity. The 1st Company was lucky, as all three shots missed by inches.[2]

As the Panthers of the 3rd Company neared Norrey they were still not under anti-tank gunfire; the Canadians had positioned a section of 6-pounder guns with primary arcs of fire to the south, where they were duelling with the 1st Panzer Company. Lüdemann gave orders over the radio for the Panthers to swing to the left and head for the trees surrounding Norrey's château. This would not only have the panzers attacking the enemy company in the village from their left rear, but present their thickest armour towards the expected anti-tank threat.

The route taken by the Panthers of the 3rd Company through the underpass and up the track parallel to the railway line to the FUP.



The attack on Norrey, 9 June 1944.

Unterscharführer Morawetz recorded that 'We drove at full speed without stopping', but at this point their luck ran out. Shermans and 17-pounder Sherman Firefly tanks from troops of the 1st Hussars and Fort Garry Horse who were returning from collecting replacement tanks from the Canadian armoured delivery regiment intervened.[3] They had just arrived south of Bretteville and, seeing the Panthers attacking side on, they engaged. *Unterscharführer* Morawetz was among their targets:

> At a range of about 1,000 metres I could see movement beyond the station and closed my hatch. At that moment there was a bang, the track was torn off and the panzer came to a halt. I thought we had hit an anti-tank mine, but we were hit again, and the panzer began to burn.

This was *Untersturmführer* Stagge's point platoon of Panthers which came under fire, losing all five tanks. Consequently, the attack came to a halt in the fields just outside the village, in range of the enemy infantry's PIATs. In the next four minutes a further two Panthers were knocked out. All Wünsche and

Ribbentrop could do was to impotently rage with frustration as the Panthers burned and the surviving five withdrew.

During the evacuation of casualties – mostly burns – medical NCO Siegfried Goose rode a motorcycle picking up casualties, but was killed by machine-gun fire. His place was taken by a member of the Kriegsmarine, *Hauptgefreiter* Biermann, who was duly taken on as an SS *Rottenführer* medic and company cook.[4,5]

Unaware of the coincidental arrival of the Canadian tanks, *Hauptmann* Lüdemann was blamed by the SS officers for the loss of seven panzers and a total of thirty casualties. Hubert Meyer commented that 'Once again it was proven that surprise raids had no expectation of success.'

The Panthers of the 3rd Company withdrawing through Rots after the battle.

The 4th Company remained in position in Rots supporting the 1st Company, 26th *Panzergrenadiers* and the Divisional Escort Company, covering the flank out towards Bretteville.

The Right Flank

Meanwhile, the 25th *Panzergrenadiers* had secured their gains of 7 June north of the Abbey d'Ardenne, but the 3rd British Division maintained pressure on the *Hitlerjugend* and 21st Panzer divisions, with the ultimate aim of capturing Caen. *Obersturmführer* Havemeister records II Battalion's preparation of defences around the hamlet of Galmanche, all the while subject to harassing artillery fire:

> … we were able to take turns digging by day and night. We also cleared fields of fire by cutting down the crops during the night. We also laid Teller mines at the edges of the fields, with wires running from the mines to the bunkers.[6] The company headquarters section dug a narrow trench on the side of the manor away from the enemy. They blew a hole into the foundation wall and set up the company headquarters in the coal cellar. Although the young soldiers thought the defences finally complete, they later dug trenches connecting the platoons. In the other cellars … the rooms were prepared for the wounded, for the storage of supplies and ammunition, and temporary shelters for artillery observers and prisoners.

326

Panther 326 back in Rots. A surviving crewman has removed the body of his commander who was cut in half by an armour-piercing round and is washing his blood from the turret.

A photo taken at the same time: *Sturmmann* Otto Funk watches the grizzly work of cleaning up.

To stop me bothering them, my young soldiers furnished my headquarters very comfortably. They covered the coal with mats from the château and brought down a Louis something or other chaise longue, which was covered with silk damask material …

After repulsing two recce patrols and an unsuccessful enemy attack,

> we daily expected heavy fire and larger-scale operations. Instead, we enjoyed a surprise visit from the rear by *Standartenführer* Kurt Meyer with a small entourage. The Regimental commander was obviously satisfied that we had not dug our positions in close proximity to the buildings.[7]

I Battalion digging in around Buron had an altogether more difficult time: the artillery fire was heavy, with one man commenting that ‘not even a mouse could have moved that day’, and they were regularly probed by Canadian patrols and attacks. They resorted to cutting down the thick anti-glider poles, ‘Rommel’s asparagus’, to provide their trenches with overhead cover. In the absence of the Anti-Tank Battalion, that role had to be performed by the II Panzer Battalion, whose Mark IVs had to motor forward to see off roving enemy tanks.

After the attack Max Wünsche, with his head bandaged, talks with the *panzergrenadiers* in the same alleyway in Rots.

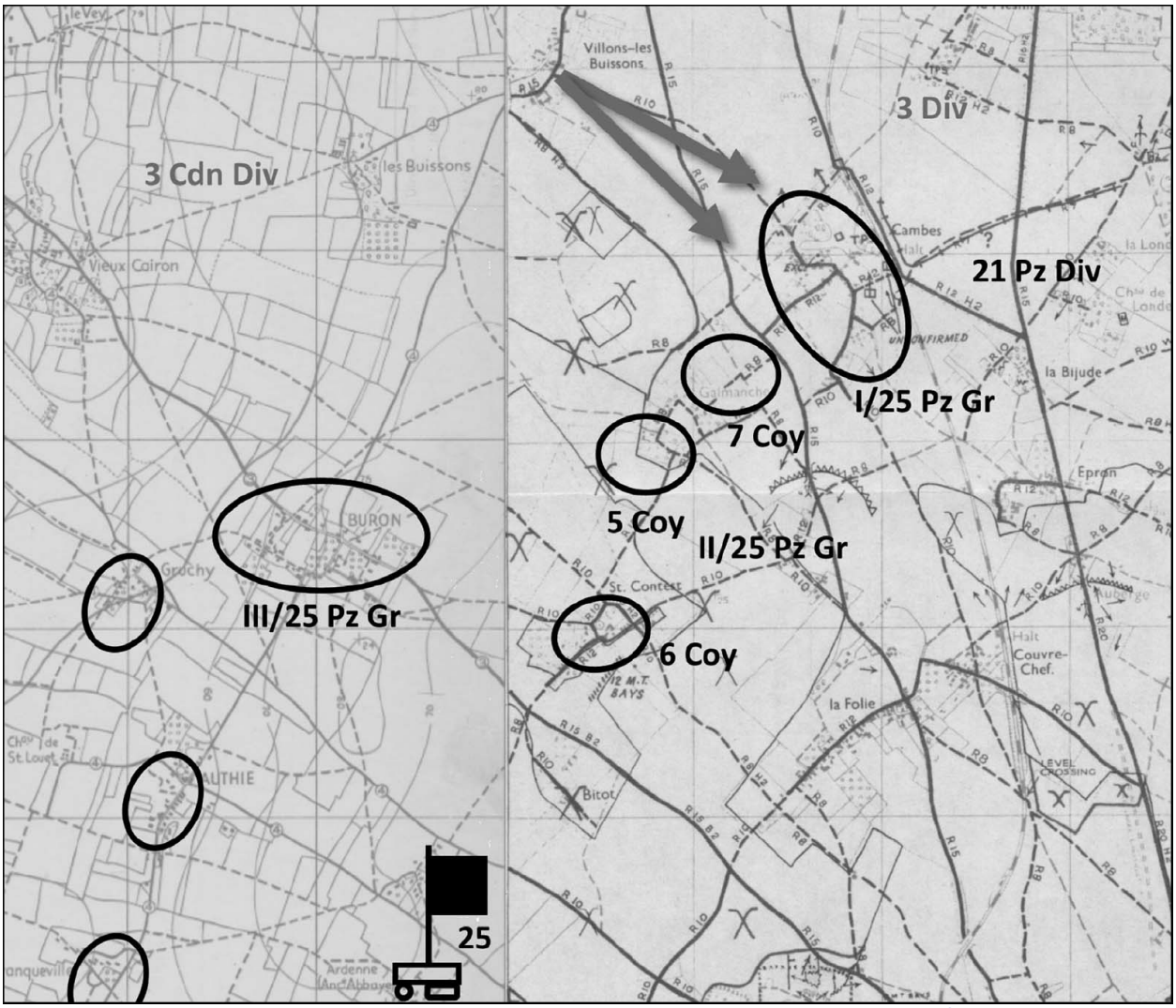
In comparison with events in the 26th *Panzergrenadier*'s sector the situation was indeed quieter, but the 7th Company spotted the Canadians forming up for a significant tank attack on their I Battalion, to their right, in Cambes:

> We had barely taken cover when ten tanks started to move out of Buissons. I was so startled that I did not immediately recognize the angled direction of their movement.

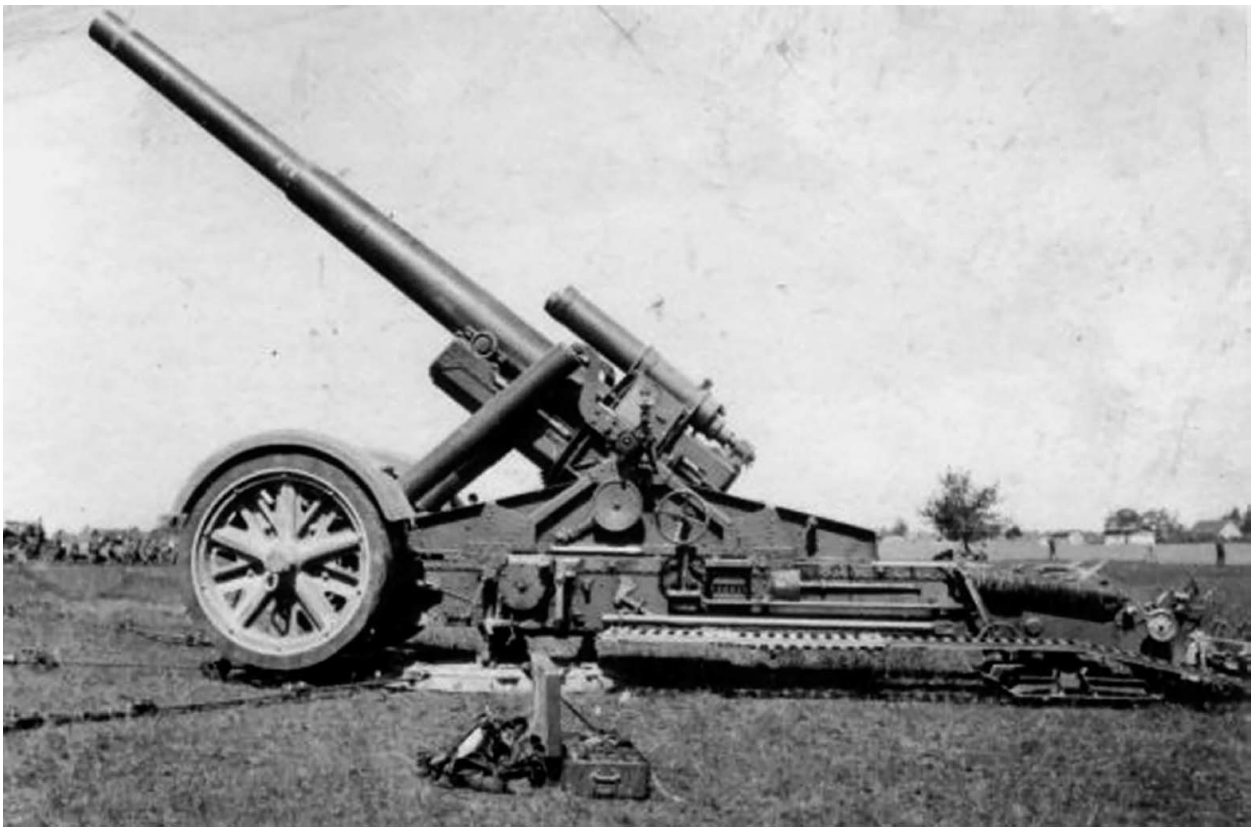
> The attack was obviously not meant for us, but for I Battalion on our right. The Canadians apparently did not know of the protrusion of our front line, almost abreast of the north-western edge of Cambes. In any case, their commanders led the attack from open hatches, in the direction of Cambes.I ordered the anti-tank commander to wait until the enemy were at the ideal distance and warned my 1st Platoon to join in with machine guns and sharpshooters as soon as the first anti-tank shell was fired. The gun commander opened the fireworks with all three guns simultaneously on the enemy flank. Within a few minutes, six tanks were knocked out and the others were driving in wild curves, their commanders dead … Only then did artillery fire on I Battalion set in. We were able to bring the guns under cover during the enemy confusion. When the fire swung over to us [II Battalion] and the 'innocent' 5th Company, all of us were in cover. The medic had to look only after three minor casualties. In the early morning we noticed, to our surprise, that all the tank wrecks had been towed away during the night …[8]

Sturmmann Decker, a mortarman in the 8th (Heavy) Company, II/25th *Panzer-grenadiers* recalls:

> On one occasion, just after the Allied landings, while they were still establishing their beachheads, the ships off the coast were firing on our positions and they gave us a lot of trouble. The whole earth shook when their huge shells exploded. It was a terrifying experience. Nonetheless, on a particular occasion, all was quiet. I had just left my position to answer a call of nature and went off into the woods to do my business when the Allied ships opened up. I immediately threw myself flat on the ground and while I was lying there, a small splinter from one of the exploding shells passed between the spread-out fingers of my left hand. It was red hot, yet it passed between my fingers without causing injury. How lucky can you get? I had no need of any laxative that day![10]



25th SS *Panzergrenadiers*' positions and the Canadian attack on Cambes.[9]



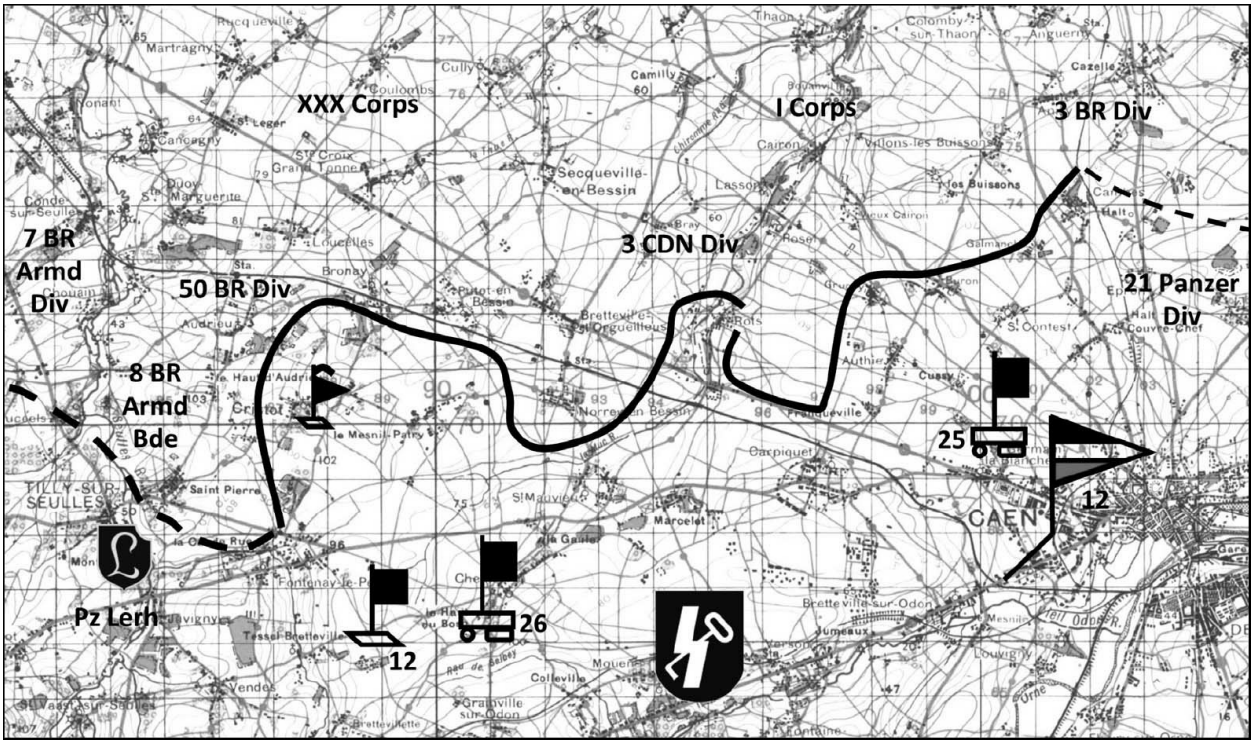
I SS Panzer Corps' heavy artillery included the 210mm Mörser Karl howitzer with a range of over 10 miles.

The *Hitlerjugend* were able to respond in kind, if not quantity, by using the 170mm and 210mm guns of I SS Panzer Corps' heavy artillery battalion, which had just arrived to join the corps. Their long-range and massive shells made life dangerous for the enemy.

The Left Flank

During the course of 9 June the 8th Armoured Brigade, in *Panzer Lehr*'s area, made slow progress in its advance south from Audrieu and Point 103 towards Tilly-sur-Seulles. There was, however, only a tenuous and vulnerable linkage between the *Hitlerjugend*'s Recce Battalion and the *Panzer Lehr*'s grenadiers to the west. To address this, the final company of Panthers to arrive at the front, the 2nd Panzer Company, was deployed to this flank and took up positions near the Parc de Boislonde between Cristot and Fontenay. The division now was very thinly spread, with scant reserves, holding a frontage of some 12 miles from the railway line north of Caen west

to Brouay and south to Fontenay.



The Divisional front, 9–10 June 1944.

In country that was so different from the open plains around Caen, for the Recce Battalion and the 2nd Panzer Company it was a day of cat and mouse with enemy tanks and infantry, watching and waiting for movement in the thick hedgerows of the Bocage country. They also had to endure the attentions of fighter-bombers that pounced on any movement and heavy artillery fire that blasted likely cover. This enemy fire was in support of the British 7th Armoured Division's drive south via Villers Bocage to envelop Caen. Even though the British attack was west of the Seulles River, casualties mounted with the recce companies being reduced now to half-strength. Among the wounded was *Sturmbannführer* Bremer, so command of the battalion was temporarily handed over to *Hauptsturmführer* von Reizenstein.

Patrols from III/26th SS *Panzergrenadiers* between the railway line and Audrieu disrupted the 8th Armoured Brigade and its attached infantry's advance south from this area. One British battalion records being attacked in the rear as it advanced south to join the tanks on Point 103!

Concern about the situation on this flank saw *Brigadeführer* Fritz Witt

redeploy the headquarters of I Battalion 12th SS Panzer and the 1st and 3rd Panzer companies to the Fontenay area during the night of 9/10 June. *Hauptsturmführer* Jürgensen's 4th Company, however, remained in its positions near Rots. The battalion war diary for the day reads:

> 10 June 1944 I/SS-Panzer Regiment 12 (Fontenay-le-Plesnel):
> Occupied the defensive positions around 0500 hours.
>
> The 2nd Company remained in the wooded area north-west of Fontenay [Parc de Boislonde]. The 1st and 3rd Companies established positions north of the road to Caen. 4th Company remained in Rots to carry out defensive tasks. Both the 2nd and 3rd Companies knocked out a Sherman. 4th Company damaged a Churchill tank with a hit on its turret. The tank is towed away. Wounded soldiers are observed being pulled out of the tank.
>
> The heaviest of bomber, fighter-bomber and artillery activity. Total losses: 3 trucks.

Norrey: The Final Attack, 10 June 1944

In preparation for the planned resumption of the offensive north to the coast on the night of 10/11 June, a final and more circumspect effort to retake Norrey was made by the *Hitlerjugend*'s only intact and uncommitted unit, the 12th Panzer Pioneer [Engineer] Battalion. At 0500 hours on 10 June, having formed up silently behind the 25th *Panzergrenadiers* in the Mue valley, the battalion began a stealthy advance in the pre-dawn darkness without a preliminary bombardment. They were, however, spotted as dawn rose behind them and they came under heavy defensive artillery and mortar fire. The pioneers dashed forward but the volume of Canadian fire was too great and, with exception of the 1st Pioneer Company, they were driven into the scant cover available in the broad valley. *Oberleutnant* Toll's 1st Company in the centre were, however, able to use a sunken road to manoeuvre around the Canadians' standing defensive fire tasks and reach to within 100 yards of the enemy positions before they were halted by small-arms and machine-gun fire. They took cover in the sunken lane, but an unequal fire-fight resulted: the *Hitlerjugend*'s Pioneers could not hope to match the Allied firepower and

their seemingly limitless supply of artillery ammunition.

When the Canadian fire reduced, Toll ordered his men to charge the enemy positions but they were again met with a deluge of fire from Norrey and they were again driven back, having lost all their officers and NCOs. By 1000 hours the battalion had withdrawn back into the Mue valley with losses of twenty-eight killed, forty-two wounded and ten missing in action.

For the *Hitlerjugend* and the rest of the panzer divisions, Hitler's campaign-defining order meant that they would be tied down 'roping off the Allied beachhead' rather than being husbanded for decisive offensive action. It would take weeks for the spectre of FUSAG and the Pas-de-Calais to fade and even longer for the infantry divisions of the Fifteenth Army to march on foot and by night to Normandy.

The Allies Go Over to the Offensive: 10 June 1944

With the 7th Armoured Division moving into position for its advance south of Bayeux, and with the 51st Highland Division deploying east of the Orne, General Montgomery aimed to capture Caen by envelopment of the city. In addition to these major thrusts, he ordered attacks all along the Allied front. Some were in direct support of the 7th Armoured's thrust south, while others were designed to unbalance German forces and prevent troops being redeployed to counter attacks of blocking tasks. The British also believed that the Seventh Army was still intending to mount its offensive and ordered I British Corps to concentrate its armour north-east of Caen in anticipation.

D.F.10.
10993
555

A *Hitlerjugend Sturmmann*.

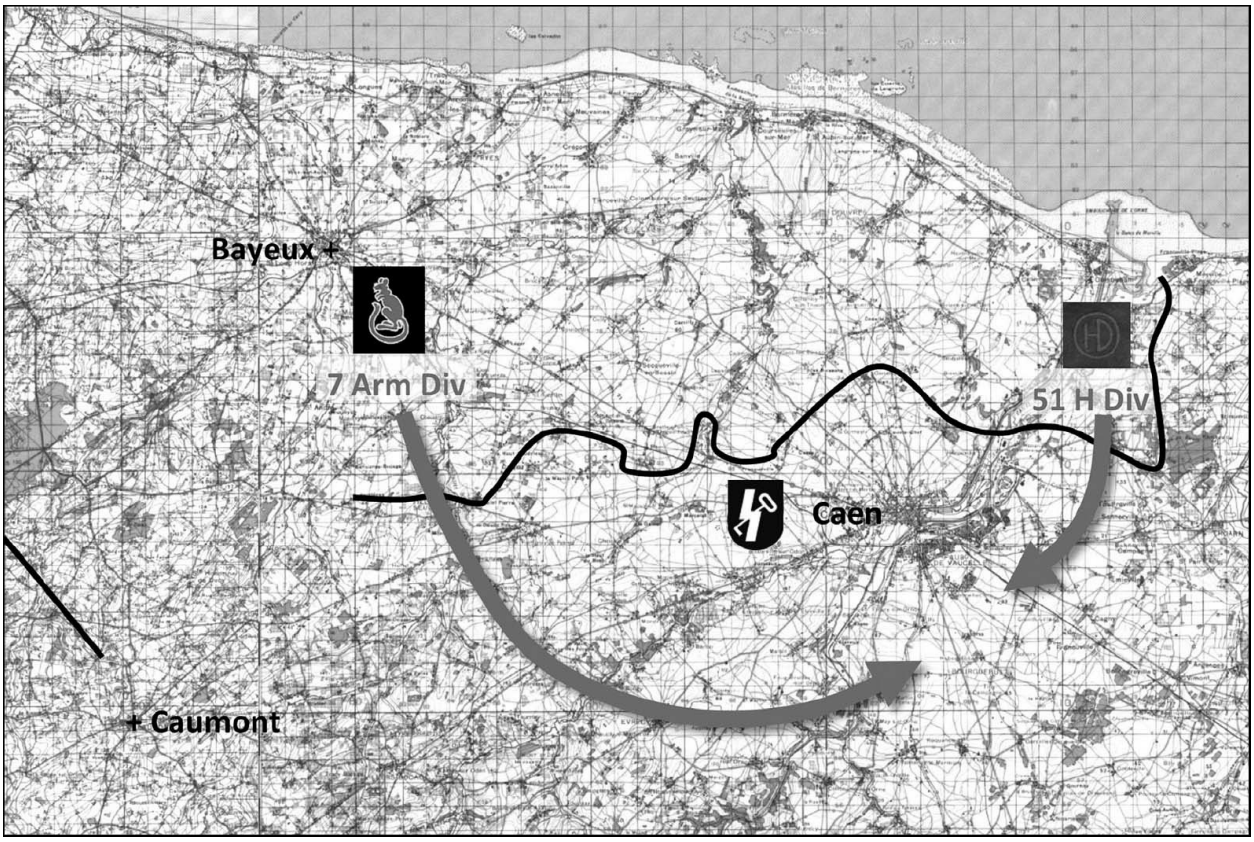
The 7th Armoured Division was committed south through the area into which elements of *Panzer Lehr* were deploying but as SS *Brigadeführer* Fritz Krämer, Chief of Staff I SS Panzer Corps wrote, they were missing an opportunity afforded by the westward drift of the remnants of the 352nd Division:

> It was still incomprehensible why the enemy exerted himself with assaults in the direction of Caen and did not make a powerful drive to exploit the open gap on either side south of Bayeux. There could be only one explanation: this place was approximately the boundary line between the British and American forces. As often happens in war, the forces of these two parties apparently were not overlapping each other and the famous line of contact existed only on the map.

Exploiting the Caumont Gap would have taken the 7th Armoured Division in a wider sweep to the west, but in view of subsequent events this may have been a better solution.

Panzer Group West

The cancellation of the latest plan to mount the offensive to the coast came as a result of an air strike on the evening of 10 June against General Geyr von Schweppenburg's Headquarters Panzer Group West, thanks to its location at Château la Caine being identified through ULTRA decrypts of German signals traffic. An Enigma encoded message timed at 0439 hours had been intercepted by the Y Service, deciphered at Bletchley Park, analysed and the RAF tasked to attack. The headquarters, which was known to have taken responsibility for organizing the German armoured offensive, was struck, initially by forty rocket-armed RAF Typhoons of the Second Tactical Air Force and followed up by a medium bomber strike. With Panzer Group West out of action and the German command in Normandy paralyzed by the time taken for I SS Panzer Corps to assume temporary command under the Seventh Army, the much delayed counter-attack, rescheduled for the night of 10/11 June, was once again and finally cancelled.



Montgomery's plan to envelop Caen and the Caumont Gap.

One of those killed in the air-raid was the accomplished veteran *Ritterkreuzträger*,[11] *Hauptsturmführer* Wilhelm Beck, the *Hitlerjugend*'s liaison officer at Panzer Group West.

Late on 10 June a directive from Berlin was coming down the German chain of command in Normandy:

> The Chief of Staff of Army Group B [General Speidel] presents the views of the Supreme Commander of the Wehrmacht [Hitler] … that there should be neither a withdrawal, fighting to the rear, nor disengagement to a new line of resistance, but that every man will fight and fall where he stands.

Hitler's decision had some practical implications for the *Hitlerjugend*, as explained by I SS Panzer Corps' Chief of Staff Fritz Krämer:

> The changeover from attack to defence was a very difficult task for Corps. Enemy air forces had upset computations of time during the

approach march into the Caen combat sector, and now there were great difficulties in bringing up the materials for field-defence improvements of the terrain. The division had only the engineer equipment belonging to its first line issue, but even this was not complete, as some vehicles had been destroyed by air attacks. We lacked particularly mines, wire, close-combat weapons (*Panzerfaust*, hand grenades, etc.) and spades. Except during lunch time, from 1200 to 1400 hours, the enemy air forces were in the air incessantly. Supplies could be transported only at night. The supply columns were highly efficient. Enemy air attacks had destroyed many ammunition dumps in the West and often it was necessary to bring ammunition and engineer equipment from depots east of the Rhine. In order to make full use of the few hours of darkness (from 2100 to 0500), vehicles moved with utmost speed. This resulted in a large number of serious accidents.[12]

General Geyr von Schweppenburg was slightly wounded in the air attack.

Hauptsturmführer Wilhelm Beck.

Nonetheless, using requisitioned tools the *Hitlerjugend* were able to dig in in the firm rocky Normandy soil in anticipation of Allied attacks.

The Left Flank: 11 June 1944

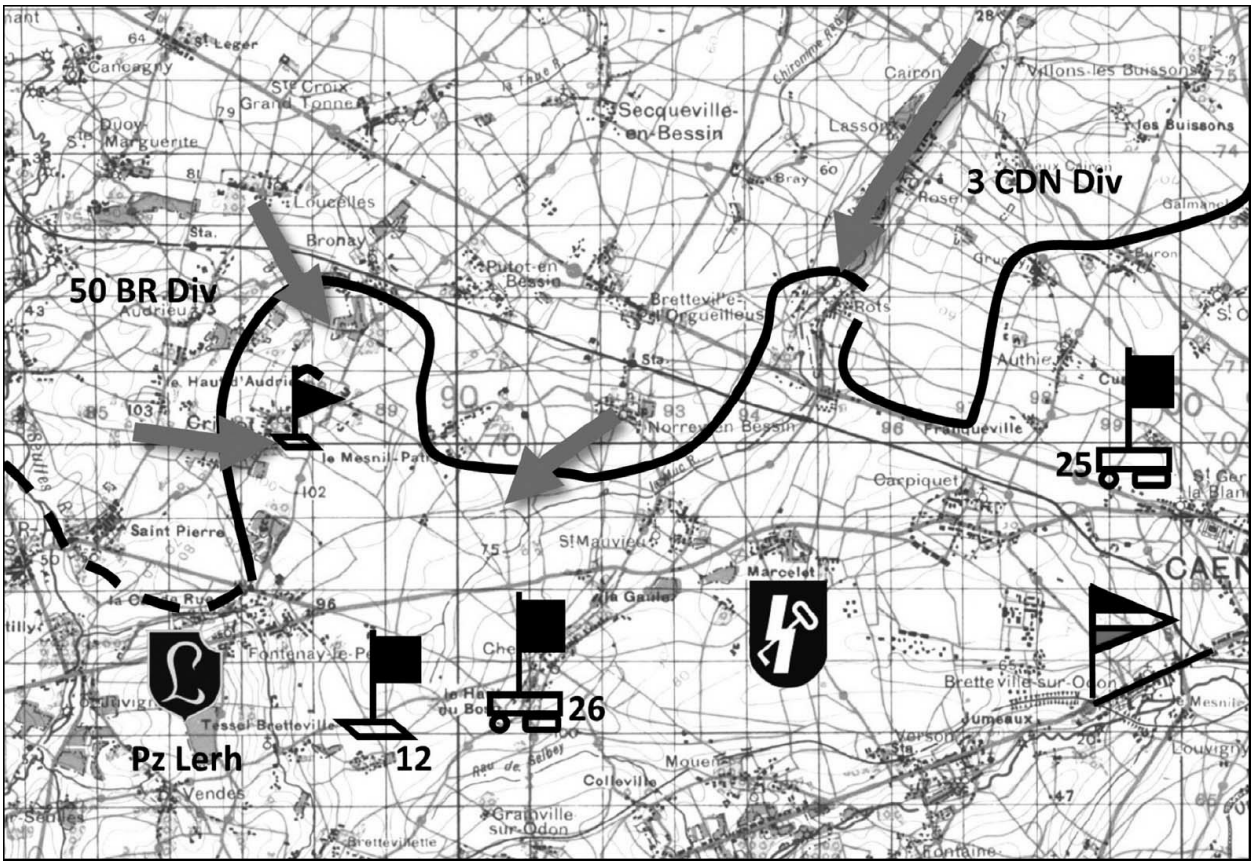
During the afternoon of the 11th the *Hitlerjugend* was to receive four separate attacks on its long front. The 3rd Canadian Division still had its 7th and 9th brigades separated astride the Mue valley and the *Hitlerjugend* in Rots formed a salient that dominated much of the valley and wanted the village in their hands. Further west the 7th Canadian Brigade aimed to drive the 26th SS *Panzer-grenadiers* back from Norrey and Putot and secure the higher ground around the south of Cheux, while on the division's left flank the 50th Division would attack the Recce Battalion with a view to making their hold on the dominating Point 103 more secure. All three operations were linked in terms of time and will be dealt with separately as they were essentially stand-alone engagements.

Success at Le Mesnil-Patry: 11 June 1944

What proved to be a useful part of the *Hitlerjugend*'s Signals Battalion was the Radio Intercept Section. Hubert Meyer explained that during the early battles 12th Company, 26th *Panzergrenadiers* captured useful documents in a carrier knocked out at Bouray:

> … these included maps and signal instructions, which helped us to understand Canadian radio messages for intelligence purposes. The map the Canadians were using was printed with code names, with features and places beginning with the same letter as the real name. For instance, the River Orne was the 'Orinoco'. They kept using these maps and names for quite some time, which was an advantage to us.[13]

These 1:25,000 and 50,000 briefing maps had been issued to the assault troops as a low-level security measure in the embarkation camps where there was still a chance that careless naming of places might reveal the D-Day secret. They were replaced with maps with the real names once the troops were securely aboard their shipping. It was not intended that the fake-named maps should be used in Normandy!



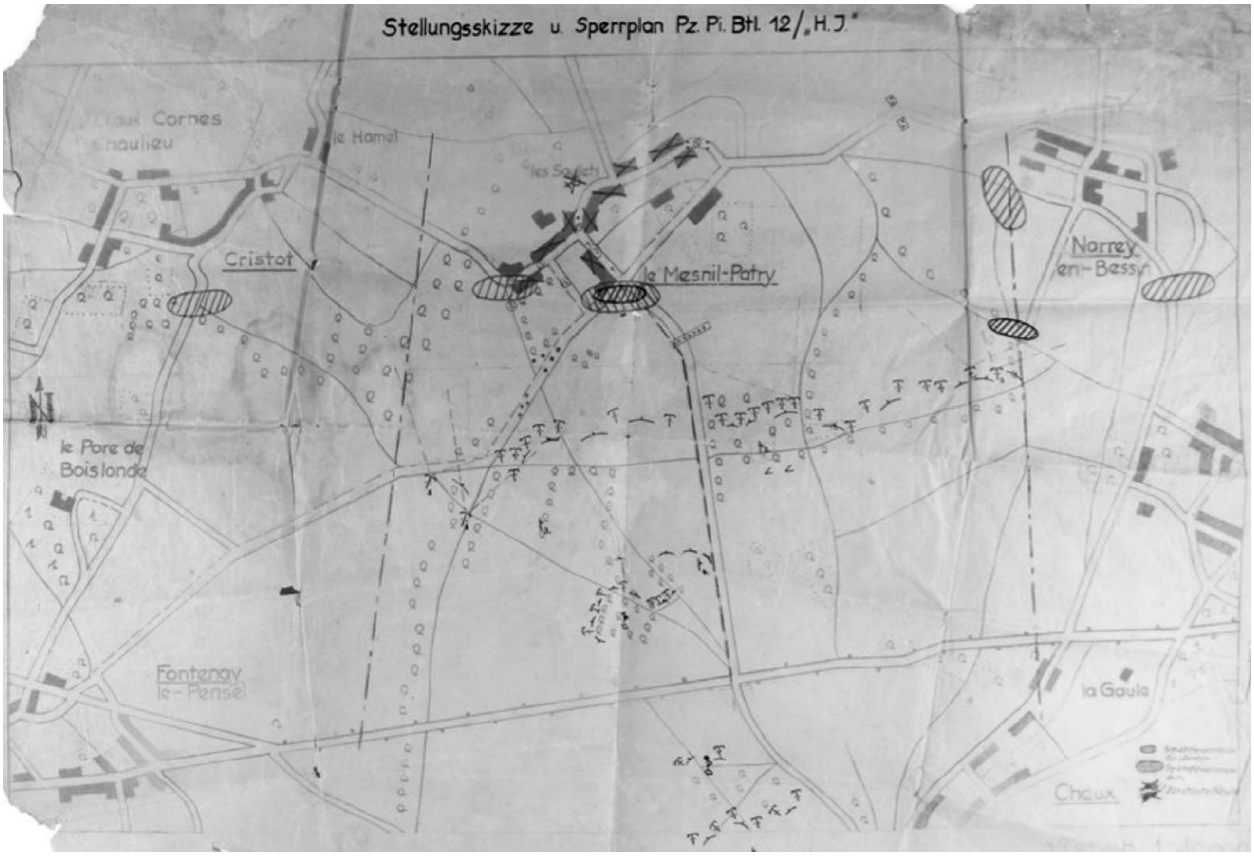
The Allied attacks on 11 June 1944.

During the morning of the 11th the Radio Intercept Section picked up the distinctive chatter of tanks and infantry assembling to launch an attack, necessitated by the short notice they had been given to deliver it.[14] The division immediately started planning their reception and negotiated fire support from the corps' heavy artillery battalion which had just arrived. The Mark IVs of II Panzer Battalion, less the 9th Company, were also brought across and deployed south of Le Mesnil-Patry.

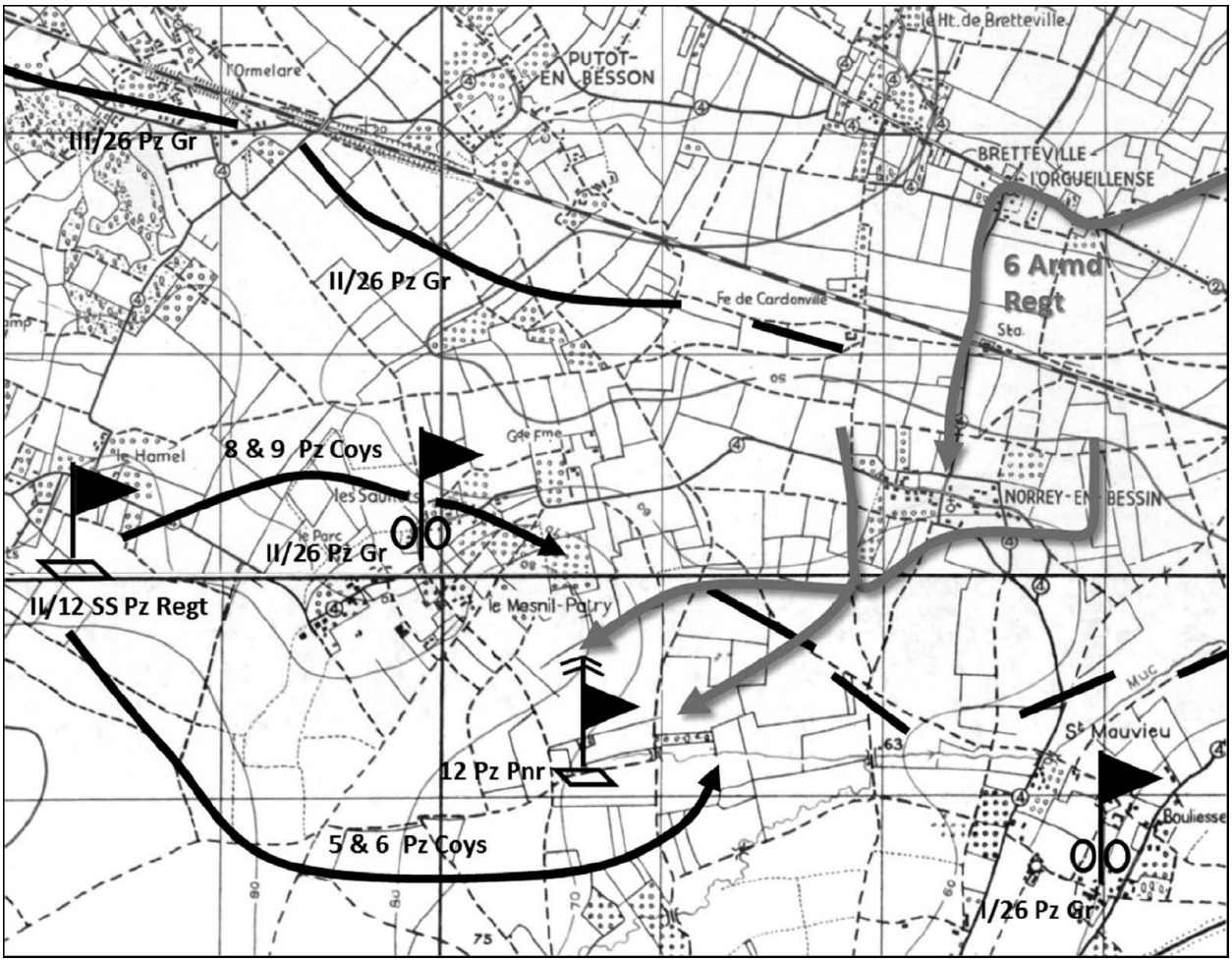
The Canadian plan was further compromised when shortly after 1300 hours the attacking troops were seen leaving Bretteville, crossing the railway line and entering Norrey, from where they would attack out of the south-west corner. The tanks were promptly brought under artillery and mortar fire and the Canadian H-hour delayed to 1420. Waiting for them was *Hauptsturmführer* Siegel's 8th Panzer Company. He recorded: "'Ready for action." The hatches of the three panzers closed as if by themselves. Gun barrels were wound down to firing elevation. Anti-tank shells were loaded on

the move.’

The Shermans of the leading squadron had only just crossed the start line and shaken out into formation when they were hit by mortars and machine-gun fire. This forced the Canadian infantry to dismount from the backs of the tanks, which motored on ahead and overran the forward German positions. The soldiers of the 12th Panzer Pioneer Battalion were dug in out in the standing crops alongside *Sturmbannführer* Krause’s *panzergrenadiers* between Le Mesnil-Patry and St Manvieu and were well camouflaged. Consequently, the Canadian tanks had difficulty locating them and the first squadron drove through them and on towards the village. The following Canadian infantry fought to clear the *Hitlerjugend* positions that had been overrun by the tanks. Pioneer Lütgens was in one of his company’s depth positions near his battalion headquarters:



An original plan of the 12th Panzer Pioneers’ defences around Le Mesnil-Patry.



The failed Canadian attack on Le Mesnil-Patry on the afternoon of 11 June 1944.

I crawled back to my hole and grabbed my first *Panzerfaust* and made it ready. I had three of them in my foxhole. Then I looked for a victim. There it sat, the Sherman, huge and mighty. Its turret was pointed in the direction of our battalion command post. Its gun fired round after round. I had to get closer to it. I started to crawl. To my right, *Unterscharführer* Mathoni appeared. He had obviously worked out what I planned since he shouted at me: 'Horst, look after yourself. I'll give you cover!' These words helped me a lot; they showed that I was not all by myself in this inferno. Now, there were even more tanks! One, two, three, four, five of these Shermans could be seen in the blue haze of the air saturated by gunpowder smoke. When I was within 20 metres, I aimed and fired. But nothing happened. A jam! Just what I needed! Once more, I cocked and fired. Jammed again! Now I was getting nervous. I cocked the weapon

> again and this time it roared off. I could not watch the hit. The tank providing cover had spotted me and was firing on me. I did hear the explosion, and then ran back zigzagging and jumped into my foxhole. All of a sudden, the Canadians turned away. I could immediately make out the reason for this. Three German panzers had joined the battle. It was a feast for the eyes.

With the battle under way, *Hauptsturmführer* Siegel commanding the 8th Company had driven forward with the three panzers of *Untersturmführer* Jeran through the scattered farms around Le Mesnil-Patry and suddenly

> … the point Panzer was already in the midst of our own infantry, several Shermans were spotted rolling at a dangerous distance toward us through the orchard of a farm. We had driven right in front of their barrels and were showing them our vulnerable flanks. 'Enemy tanks from the left – 9 o'clock 200 – open fire!' This was all the chief of the 8th Company, who was also the commander of the point panzer, could do. But nothing else was required. The months-long drills and battle experience of the crews now proved themselves. The driver jerked the panzer to the left, bringing it into firing position. Even before the fighting compartment ventilation fan, crucial for the survival of the crew, got to full speed, the closest enemy tank had been hit. Within a minute or so, four or five Shermans were burning.

Only a handful of Canadian tanks and infantry reached Le Mesnil-Patry. The leading squadron, or what was left of it, had been joined in the attack by a second but the final squadron and RHQ were still threading their way through Norrey and their own infantry's minefields!

Panzerfaust ('Panzer Fist')

The Germans had led the way exploiting the Munro Effect of focusing explosive force and produced the first hollow-charge weapons, which they used to blast their way into the Belgian superfortress of Eben-Emael as the opening act of the 1940 campaign.

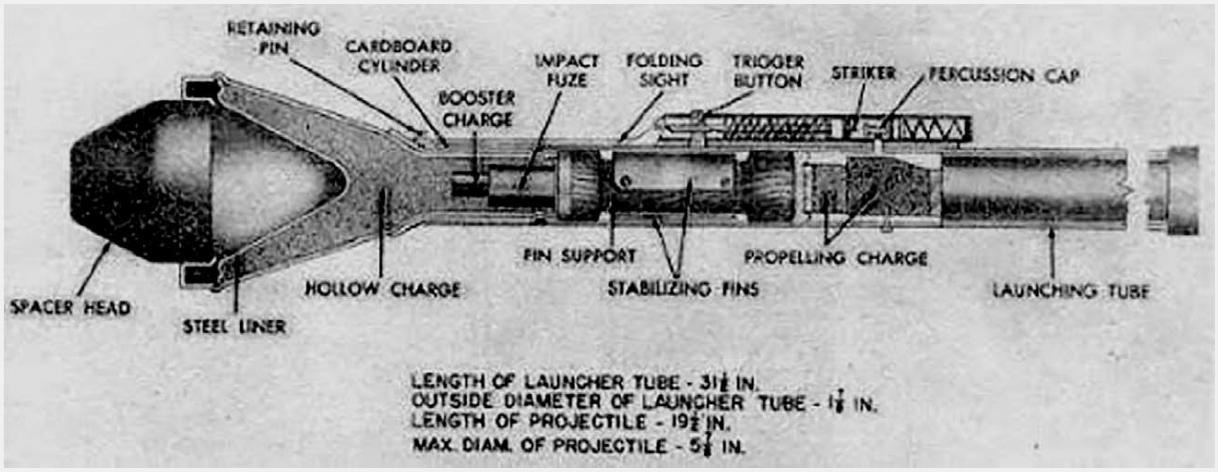
How the *Panzerfaust* worked

On detonation the warhead's explosive charge compressed a shaped metal liner and

focused it into a high-velocity superplastic jet or self-forging fragment, which burned its way through armour, penetrating to a theoretical depth of up to six times the diameter of the charge. The hollow charge was, however, less effective if the warhead failed to hit its target at 90 degrees.

The warhead was propelled by a rocket, with the exhaust exiting from the rear of the launch tube to produce a 'recoilless' balance for the user.

A sketch of aiming and firing the weapon. Note the *Panzerfaust*'s back-blast.



A diagram showing the workings of the *Panzerfaust*.

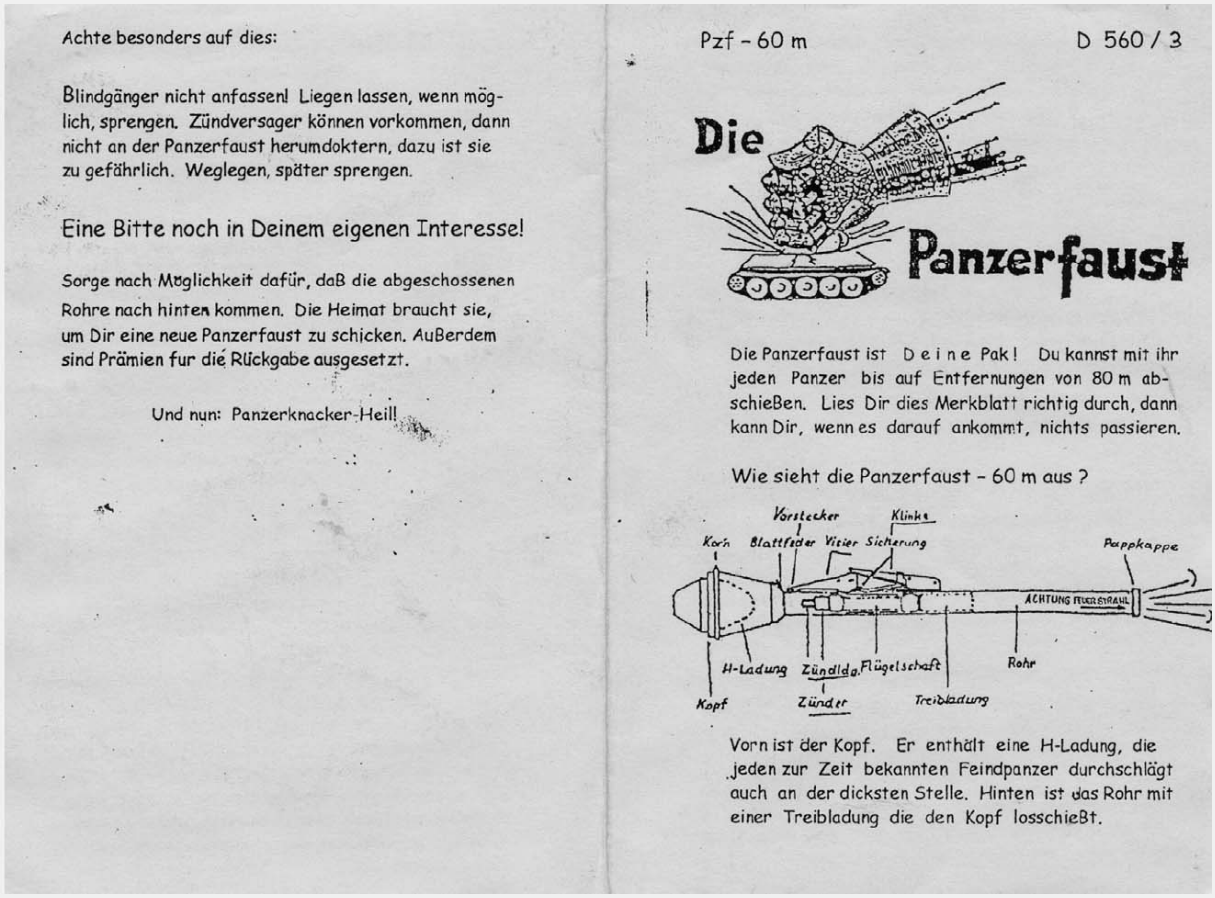
Deployment

The first prototypes of the *Kline Gretchen* version began to appear in 1942, but by 1944 it was available in four variants suitable for differing range brackets from 30–150

metres. The *Panzerfaust* was an infantry section weapon, which when available in number was successful in keeping Allied tanks from motoring onto defensive positions, particularly in villages and close country. Because of the back-blast, the weapon could not normally be fired from within the cover of buildings. Once fired, the launch tube was disposable.

The *Panzerfaust* 100.

In response to the *Panzerfaust*, Allied tanks lacking 'bazooka plates' would typically use sandbags and logs to up-armour, but the most successful measure was the application of tank-track links which produced a spaced armour that helped to defeat the shaped charge.



Achte besonders auf dies:

Blindgänger nicht anfassen! Liegen lassen, wenn möglich, sprengen. Zündversager können vorkommen, dann nicht an der Panzerfaust herumdoktern, dazu ist sie zu gefährlich. Weglegen, später sprengen.

Eine Bitte noch in Deinem eigenen Interesse!

Sorge nach Möglichkeit dafür, daß die abgeschossenen Rohre nach hinten kommen. Die Heimat braucht sie, um Dir eine neue Panzerfaust zu schicken. Außerdem sind Prämien fur die Rückgabe ausgesetzt.

Und nun: Panzerknacker-Heil!

Pzf – 60 m D 560 / 3

Die Panzerfaust

Die Panzerfaust ist D e i n e Pak! Du kannst mit ihr jeden Panzer bis auf Entfernungen von 80 m abschießen. Lies Dir dies Merkblatt richtig durch, dann kann Dir, wenn es darauf ankommt, nichts passieren.

Wie sieht die Panzerfaust – 60 m aus ?

Vorn ist der Kopf. Er enthält eine H-Ladung, die jeden zur Zeit bekannten Feindpanzer durchschlägt auch an der dicksten Stelle. Hinten ist das Rohr mit einer Treibladung die den Kopf losschießt.

The front page of a very simple instruction manual for the *Panzerfaust*.

A grenadier and *Panzerfaust* in action.

Only 6 per cent of British and Canadian tanks were knocked out in Normandy by *Panzerfausts*, but later in the North-West European Campaign, with the *Panzerfaust* filling the vacuum created by the loss of anti-tank guns, it rose to 34 per cent.

As the battle developed, *Sturmbannführer* Prinz brought the rest of his battalion's panzers up and virtually annihilated the two Canadian squadrons and their infantry company. The losses to the *Hitlerjugend* in terms of manpower were similar but they only lost three Mark IVs versus the thirty-odd Canadian hulks that dotted the fields between Norrey and Le Mesnil-Patry.[15] The difference was that while the Canadians had some infantry replacements but a seemingly unending supply of fresh tanks, every loss to the *Hitlerjugend* was extremely hard to replace.[16]

The aftermath of this battle stands in contrast to those of previous days, as

Hauptsturmführer Siegel recalled:

> After I had reached our own lines again, together with a Canadian corporal who had surrendered, an uncommonly impressive scene could be observed. The Canadians were driving ambulances onto the battlefield. Each of them had a man standing on the running board, waving a large Red Cross flag. Medics with stretchers jumped off while the flag carriers continued to wave their flags. For approximately half an hour, the wounded were found and removed, as if it were a peace-time exercise. Not a shot was fired to disturb this activity.

Attacks on the Left Flank

Coordinated with the Canadian attack on Le Mesnil-Patry was a significant effort by the 50th Division to expand the narrow corridor down to Point 103 and routes to the bitter fighting for Tilly-sur-Seulles. This was delivered by the 69th Brigade against the Recce Battalion and III/26th *Panzergrenadiers*. Two British battalions attacked into the divisional area: firstly, from north of the railway line and secondly, from Le Haut d'Audrieu 1.5 miles to the south.

The fighting in the hedgerows that day was confusing for both sides. The Recce Battalion, partly to disguise the extent and weakness of its position, was patrolling aggressively west to Audrieu and Point 103, where the 8th Armoured Brigade was now on the defensive. The enemy in his accounts has interpreted these as 'attacks' by the *Hitlerjugend* and has conflated them with attacks from the south by *Panzer Lehr*.

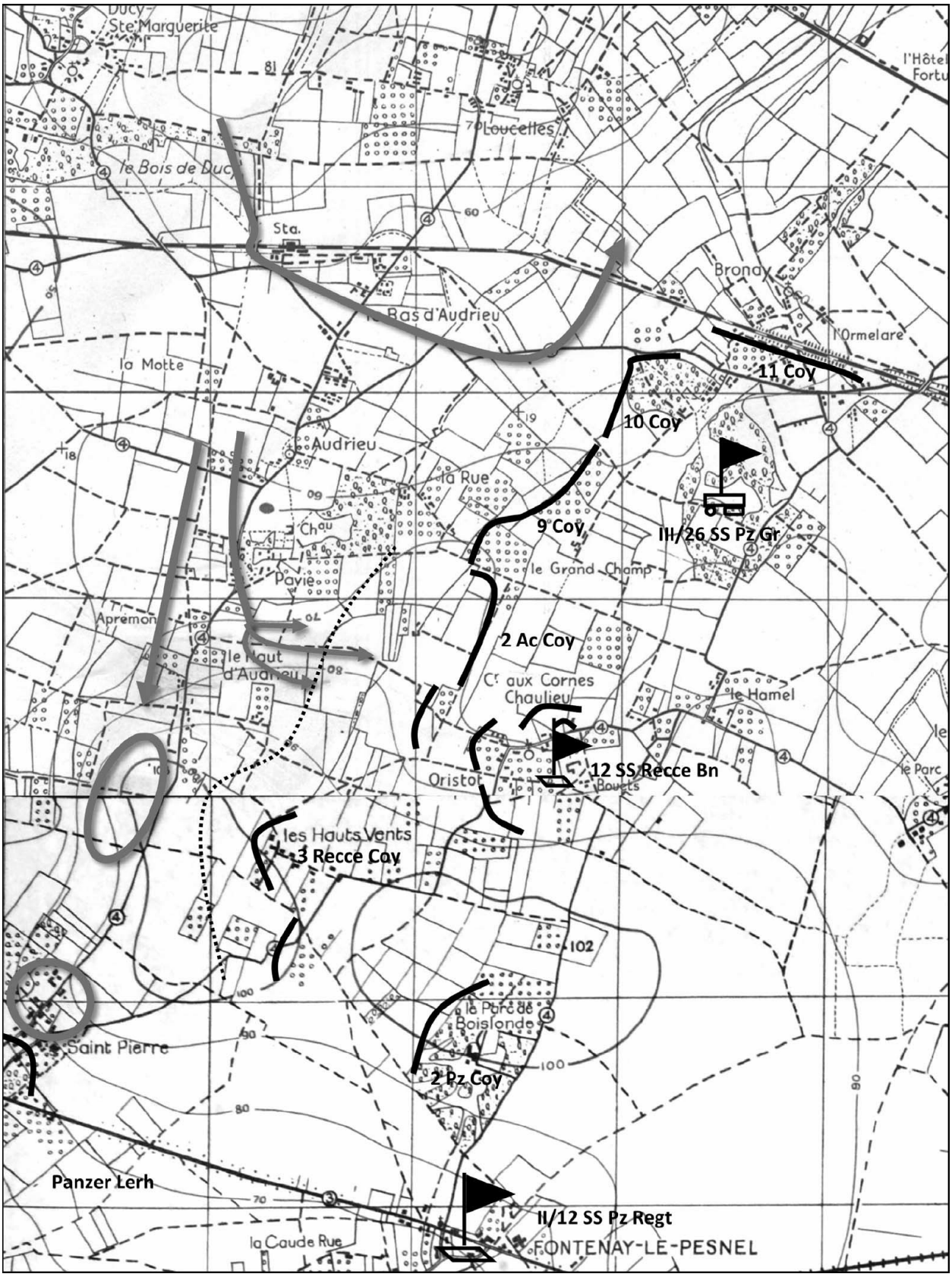
By the afternoon of 11 June, however, despite the best efforts of the Recce Battalion, it was apparent to the British that their flank to the east was weak thanks to a reconnaissance in force by a squadron of tanks during the morning. The 6th Green Howards, supported by three under-strength squadrons of Shermans (but not the squadron that had carried out the recce), was tasked to take the high ground of Point 102 to the south-east of Cristot. Time was short and when the Green Howards' commanding officer protested about the lack of recce and fire plan, he was told to 'get on with it and take Pt 102'. The assumption was that there was little opposition.

The historian of the 4th/7th Dragoon Guards recorded the difficulties of

attacking in the Bocage:

> … rarely could a tank see as much as 400 yards. The ground was absolutely ideal for defence and when it was resolutely defended, as it was by SS *Panzer-grenadiers*, one German machine-gunner and a couple of snipers could prevent an entire battalion moving the hundred yards between one hedge and the next until they were either killed by a direct hit (and as it was usually impossible to spot them, this was unlikely), or they were physically dug out of their hiding places in a hand-to-hand fight.

The advance began at 1430 hours with a single squadron leading and, as implied above, they and the infantry were soon fighting separate battles. As a tank crewman explained, the enemy infantry ‘lay low until the tanks had passed, then opened up on the infantry with Spandaus. Then they set on the isolated tanks.’ The leading Shermans, having penetrated through the Recce Battalion’s dismounted troops, indeed found themselves being picked off one by one by the 75mm anti-tank guns, which without a pre-arranged fire plan the British found impossible to neutralize. In this thick country the *Panzerfaust* was proving to be in its element. In addition to the anti-tank weapons and guns, at least four Panthers of I Battalion were observed engaging the British tanks. Seven of the nine Shermans in the leading squadron were knocked out.



The attacks by the 50th Division on the afternoon of 11 June 1944.

Meanwhile, the British infantry was only making slow progress through the hedgerows astride a sunken lane. Their historian records that they were up against opposition of a quality not previously encountered during the five days since the invasion. Their commander now had to organize a deliberate attack, but despite trying to outflank the outpost line of the Recce Battalion's 3rd Company, the attack ground to a halt only a matter of a couple of hundred yards east of the Audrieu-St Pierre road. Casualties among British infantry commanders mounted, and they remained pinned down, eventually being withdrawn at nightfall. The 6th Green Howards suffered around 200 casualties, many of whom became prisoners of war, in their attempted attack on Point 102. The *Hitlerjugend* had suffered seventy casualties.

A well-camouflaged member of the division wearing the ‘Dot 44’ *Erbsenmuster* (peas pattern) tunic.

The attack by the 7th Green Howards further north also began at 1430 hours. Their objective was the woods and château south of Brouay, which

was the headquarters of III/26th *Panzergrenadiers*. The British battalion started north of the railway line and its left company was under fire from the 11th Company in the southern part of Brouay before they even crossed it, and the fire only redoubled when the right company crossed into the arcs of the 10th Company. In the more open country between Brouay and Le Bas d'Audrieu, the British infantry were halted before they had advanced 100 yards by the significant weight of firepower available to III/26th *Panzergrenadiers*. The company promptly fell back across the railway and the battalion withdrew after dark. They had lost sixty-seven men in total (twenty-seven killed, thirty wounded and ten missing).

The Loss of Rots: 11 June 1944

While on the division's left the situation was under control by late afternoon, the immediate problem for the *Hitlerjugend* was their salient at Le Hamel and Rots, which was receiving the attention of the Canadians' armour and British Commandos. The positions in the village had been subject to artillery fire for several days, but on the morning of 11 June a bombardment by medium guns heralded an attack by a company of Canadian infantry which was beaten off.

With the main force having advanced and cleared down the Mue, during the afternoon, the leading squadron of Shermans was seen moving south from Rostel on the high ground west of the valley. When they came in range, Panthers of the 4th Company knocked out several and drove the others back. The Canadian bombardment of Rots was promptly resumed.

During the next attack the Commandos were more successful and broke into the lightly-held commune of Le Hamel with fire support from their comrades and tanks while Rots was bombarded. *Sturmmann* Kesper recalled:

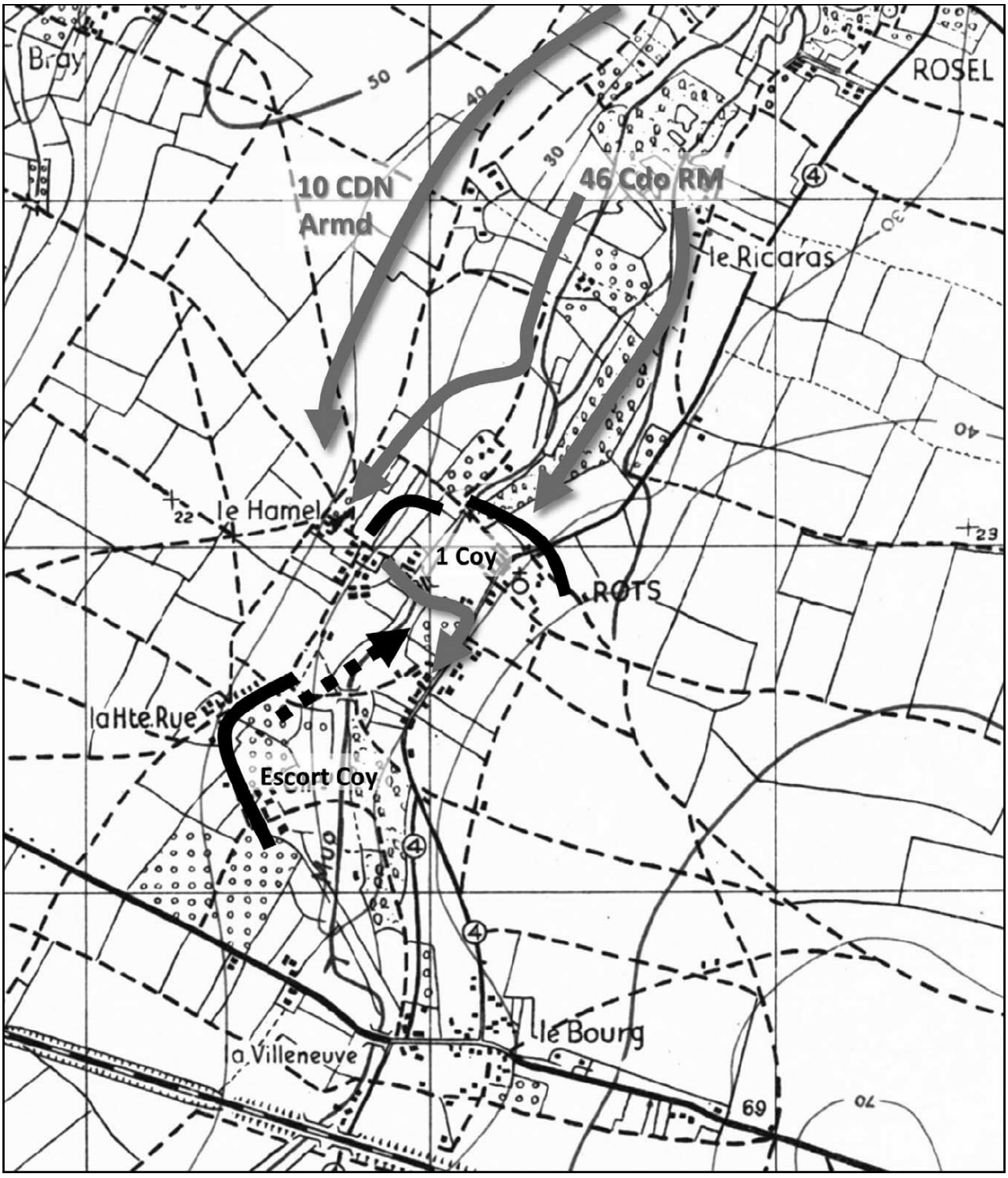
> Some of our own infantry were pinned down lying in the ditch, with tank shells exploding all around but we returned the fire on the enemy tanks and infantry. The commandos and [enemy] panzers got into northern Rots but 1st Company [26th SS *Panzergrenadiers*] had lost so many men that they were pushed back. The Divisional Escort Company counter-attacked with two infantry sections and a platoon of Panthers and cleared the village. The Panzers knocked out six Shermans and took

forty prisoners.

In the face of growing enemy strength, the 1st Company were again forced back and conducted a fighting withdrawal down the main street of Rots. They were ordered to make a stand in the centre of the village near the main bridge, while the Commandos attempted to outflank them via the fields on either side. The result was bitter and protracted close-quarter fighting between *Panzergrenadier* and Commando, Panther, *Panzerfaust* and Sherman, as well as Panther versus Sherman when some of the latter crossed the bridge and fought in the village street. Major Lee of 46 Commando described the *Hitlerjugend* soldiers:

British Marines of 46 Commando taken prisoner during the fighting at Rots.

The enemy showed themselves to be troops of very different quality from those manning the coastal defences. They were lightly-equipped, well-camouflaged and obviously very well trained. They darted from house to house, changing their positions all the time. Except on one occasion when confronted by a Sherman at close quarters, they showed no inclination to surrender. Their morale was obviously very high.



The fighting in Rots: pm, 11 June 1944.

Eventually the survivors of *Untersturmführer* Guntrum's Divisional Escort Company and the 1st Company were driven back to La Villeneuve and Le Bourg on the Caen-Bayeux Road and a company of Canadian infantry was

sent to join the Commandos. By first light on 12 June the *Hitlerjugend* companies had withdrawn further to Franqueville and south of the railway. The Commandos had delivered the only Allied success against the division on 11 June.

In testimony to the ferocity of the fighting in Rots, an officer of the Chaudière Regiment, who arrived in the village the following morning, recorded:

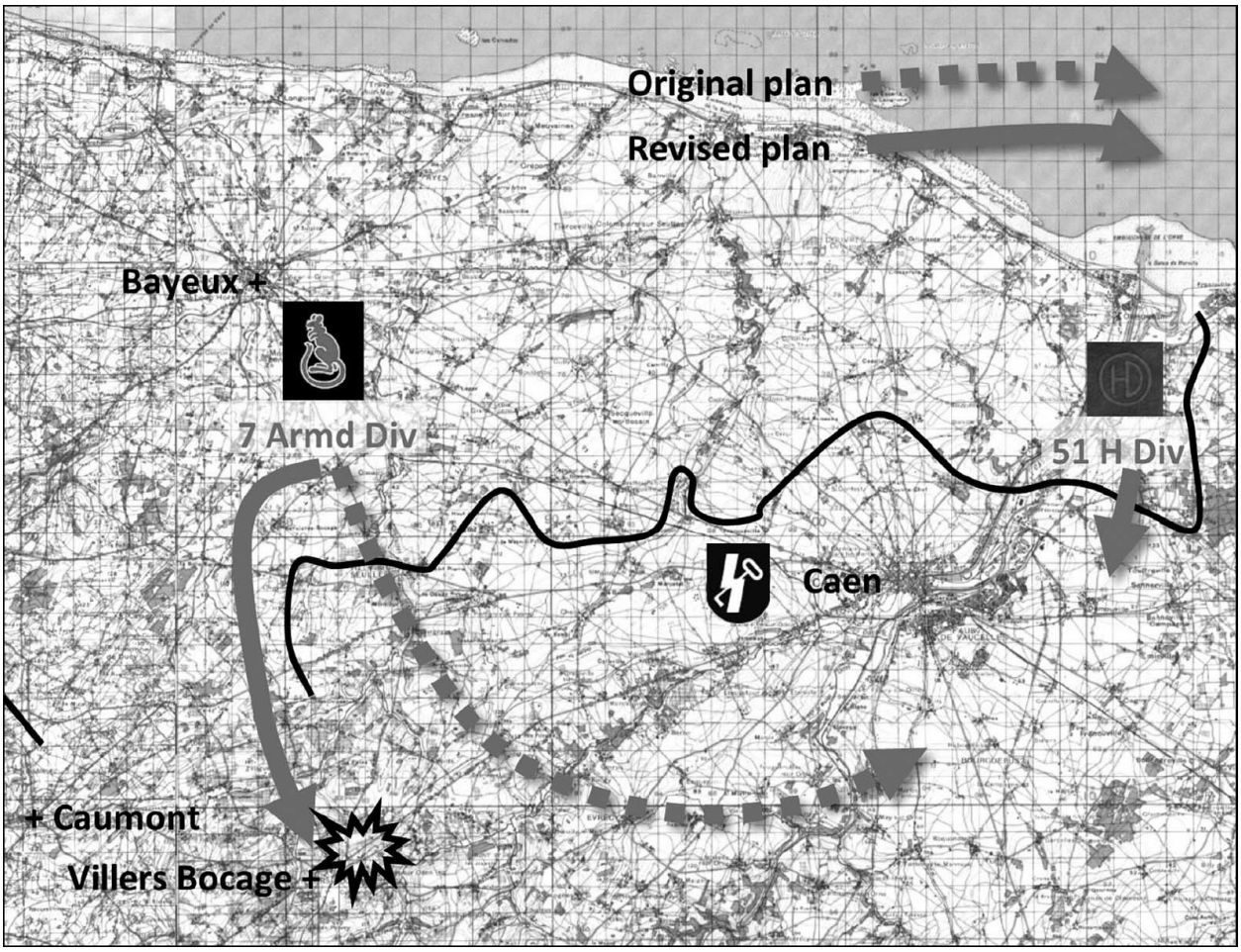
> They fought like lions on both sides. The dead were lying body to body. We searched every house, every yard, to prevent ambushes. That is the confirmation of how brutal the fighting of last night must have been. The Commandos were lying dead in rows next to the dead SS men. Hand grenades were scattered everywhere in the streets and front doors of the houses. At one spot we saw a Commando and an SS man who died virtually arm-in-arm, one killing the other. At another spot we found a German and a Canadian tank, having crushed each other. They were still smoking and from each of the smoke-blackened turrets hung the dead bodies of the machine-gunners. Over there was a squad which had run towards a small wall to seek cover. They had been shot down before they reached it. And then, at the church, as the vanguard of C Company … swung around the corner, they encountered three Germans. Only three. But one of them immediately drew his pistol and hit one of our men. A machine-gunner killed two of the three SS men, but the survivor did not surrender. He tricked us and disappeared. Now you will understand what fanatics we were fighting.

12 June 1944

While it was relatively quiet on the *Hitlerjugend*'s front, Montgomery's plan to envelop Caen had been hitherto thwarted by *Panzer Lehr* at Tilly-sur-Seulles. Consequently, on 12 June the 7th Armoured Division's main effort was switched further west into the Caumont Gap, which over the previous two days the Germans had been rushing to fill with units brought from far and wide. One of these was a company of five Tigers from the I SS Panzer Corps' heavy panzer battalion. This battalion had marched on its tracks from

the area of Paris, with only twenty-eight of their forty-five Tigers arriving in Normandy. This number was further reduced to fifteen operational vehicles when their woodland hide was identified and bombed. Of these, five panzers under the command of *Hauptsturmführer* Michael Wittmann humbled the vaunted Desert Rats at Villers Bocage on 13 June by bringing their eastward move to an abrupt halt.[17]

Knocked-out tanks belonging to the 7th Armoured Division being inspected by German soldiers.



Montgomery's plan to envelop Caen thwarted.

Meanwhile, in the routine of defence *Sturmmann* Decker of the 25th *Panzer-grenadiers* recalls the presence of fighter-bombers overhead as normal:

> *Jabo* activity made it virtually impossible to move about during the daytime. We always moved at night. We moved almost every night to another position. It was horrendous in the daytime; you just couldn't move at all. I was walking by the edge of a field early one morning; there was a lot of enemy air activity. I was on my own, but even so these fighter-bombers came down after me! They attacked me, on my own! Let me tell you I jumped into the woods at the side of the field pretty damn quick. The sky was full of planes, all Allied. They shot at everything that moved …[18]

It wasn’t only the fighter-bombers that Decker and his comrades had to cope with:

> I remember another incident that took place when we were dug in. We were in the woods. While one might think that this would be reasonably safe, that was not always the case. Enemy artillery would often fire into the woods at random, probing our positions. The shells would often explode in the treetops. This resulted in shrapnel flying all over the place. It was very dangerous; we had to be particularly careful and if they thought we were in the woods, they fired into them.

Sturmmann Karl-Heinz Decker.

Death of SS *Brigadeführer* Fritz Witt

Divisional Headquarters of the *Hitlerjugend* had remained by the railway at Venoix on the western outskirts of Caen since 8 June. It was established in a nondescript but substantial building with large gardens and plenty of trees under which the Signal Battalion's vehicles could be concealed. For greater protection deep dugouts were built behind the house.

Early on the morning of 14 June, SS *Brigadeführer* Fritz Witt, in contravention of his normal routine, was not out visiting his regiments but back at the headquarters. Hubert Meyer, who had been allowed away from the headquarters to look at proposed withdrawal positions, recalled:

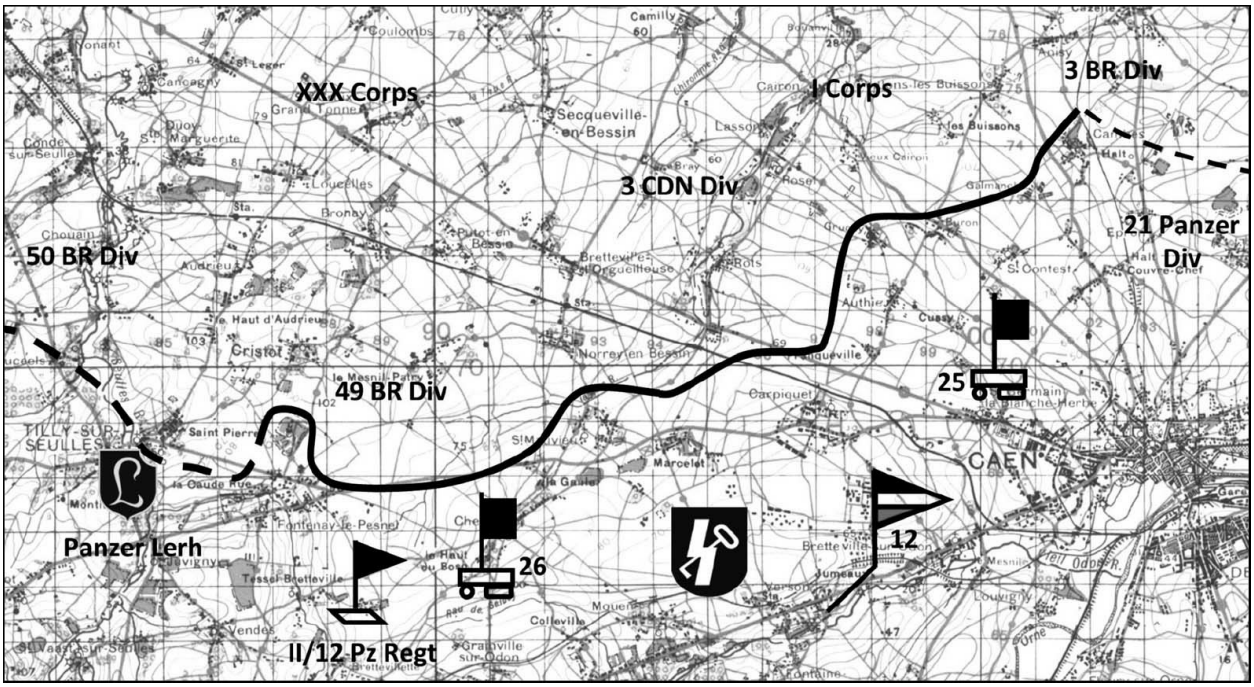
> I was out looking at the new line that we proposed to pull back to. It was the first time I had been away from the headquarters since the invasion. There was a call on the radio saying that something had happened at the headquarters and that I should return immediately. They didn't say what had happened for security reasons; I could only speculate as we drove, fast, back to Venoix.
>
> The headquarters had been bracketed by naval artillery and then hit.[19] Our chief SS *Brigadeführer* Witt and the staff went to take cover in the shelters in the garden. He was the last into the shelter and was hit in the head and killed instantly by shrapnel from a naval shell that detonated in the trees. He was the father of the division and was a great loss to us all.
>
> When I got back, I immediately rang I SS Panzer Corps on the telephone to report and summoned 'Panzer' Meyer to take command of the division.[20]

Fritz Witt (centre), Wünsche (left) and Kurt Meyer conferring.

Following the strike on the divisional headquarters, it was redeployed further west in the valley of the River Odon in the southern part of Verson. This time, with fears of Allied radio direction-finding, the Radio Company was deployed some distance away from the headquarters and connected by telephone cable.

On another occasion the Radio Intercept Section again showed its worth when it picked up the enemy making arrangements for fire on the headquarters of the 12th SS Panzer Regiment in the château buildings at Rauray. This gave time for all non-essential men and vehicles to be cleared from the area. The resulting bombardment did little damage to the dug-in troops or panzers.[21]

Fritz Witt’s field grave at Tillières-sur-Avre.



The divisional front following the withdrawal during 14–16 June.

Withdrawal

The enemy pressure south of Point 103 and at Tilly-sur-Seulles was gradually pushing *Panzer Lehr* back and exposing the division's already westward-facing left flank. Much of the rest of the 26th *Panzergrenadiers*' front was too close to that of the enemy to stand much of a chance of holding a major attack. Withdrawing to a line based on the Fontenay-St Manvieu road, a distance at most of just over 2 miles, would also enable the Recce Battalion to be reconstituted as a divisional reserve. I SS Panzer Corps also finally accepted that the division should withdraw in contravention of Hitler's order not to give up an inch of ground.

The panzers of II Battalion covered the withdrawal of the 26th SS *Panzer-grenadiers* but remained forward to make up for the continuing absence of the anti-tank battalion. The Panthers, however, were extracted and concentrated around battalion headquarters in Le Bas des Forges.

With the Recce Battalion having withdrawn from the left flank, the Radio Intercept Section provided the division with intelligence that the enemy was going to mount another attack on Cristot which they believed to be still held. Again, the opportunity was taken to make a plan to catch the British from the

newly-arrived 49th Division out in the open. The usual heavy Allied bombardment fell on the village, which now contained only a handful of *Hitlerjugend* observers and snipers, but the enemy battalion and tanks, advancing across the fields and hedgerows, were in turn heavily shelled and mortared. This made the ‘capture’ of the village an expensive business for the enemy. Reports from British patrols that pushed forward from Cristot confirmed that the enemy had gone.

Chapter Five

Fighting EPSOM

With the defeat of the 7th Armoured Division and the consequent failure of his second attempt to capture Caen, General Montgomery accepted that he would have to pause for a few days before he had assembled sufficient combat power to resume offensive operations. The weather, however, intervened between 19 and 21 June when a north-easterly storm slowed the in-load of combat supplies and fresh formations to 20 per cent of the previous rate. The German high command was also planning major offensives. To that end II SS Panzer Corps was on its way from Russia, the 1st *Leibstandarte* SS Panzer Division was entrained in Belgium and the 2nd *Das Reich* SS Panzer Division was making its much delayed way from southern France.[1] In addition, sundry infantry formations were on the way but with FORTITUDE still effective, only a few divisions from the Pas-de-Calais were being released. Due to Allied air action Rommel would, however, not have forces assembled for an offensive before early July.

Meanwhile, the *Hitlerjugend* continued to strengthen its positions on its long front. The area around Fontenay was held by *Sturmbannführer* Siebken's II/26th SS *Panzergrenadiers*, while the rest of the 26th were dug in amid the scant remains of the crops, just forward of the Fontenay-St Manvieu road. The five companies of Panzer IVs, still filling the role of the anti-tank battalion, were dug in on the gently rising ridge south of the road, complete with alternative positions for every panzer. Some 3 miles behind them were several batteries of dual-purpose 88mm guns belonging to III Flak Corps, deployed in a strip of thick country between the Caen-Villers Bocage railway and the steep-sided valley of the River Odon.[2] Also in the area behind the

26th SS *Panzergrenadiers* were the Panthers of I/12th Panzer Regiment, as this was where the next Allied blow was expected.

The enemy was also not idle during this period and sought to make progress in the Bocage country between Cristot and Fontenay in order to gain a firm grip on Point 102. On 17 June they followed up their ‘capture’ of Cristot the previous day with an attack on Parc de Boislonde, which the 49th Division secured following a heavy bombardment. The war diary of II/12th Panzer Regiment reads:

> Today, after heavy artillery preparation the enemy succeeded in breaking into the positions of SS *Panzergrenadier* Regiment 26 (Siebken’s battalion) north of the small wooded [orchard] area of Parc de Boislonde and securing the latter.
>
> At 1330 hours our grenadiers launched a counter-attack. The 8/SS-Panzer Regiment 12 commanded and supported this counter-attack from the southwest.

One of the Hitlerjugend’s trenches and its occupants preparing for battle.

1430 hours: in order to be able to provide further support for the counterattack 6/SS-Panzer Regiment 12 launched an attack from its

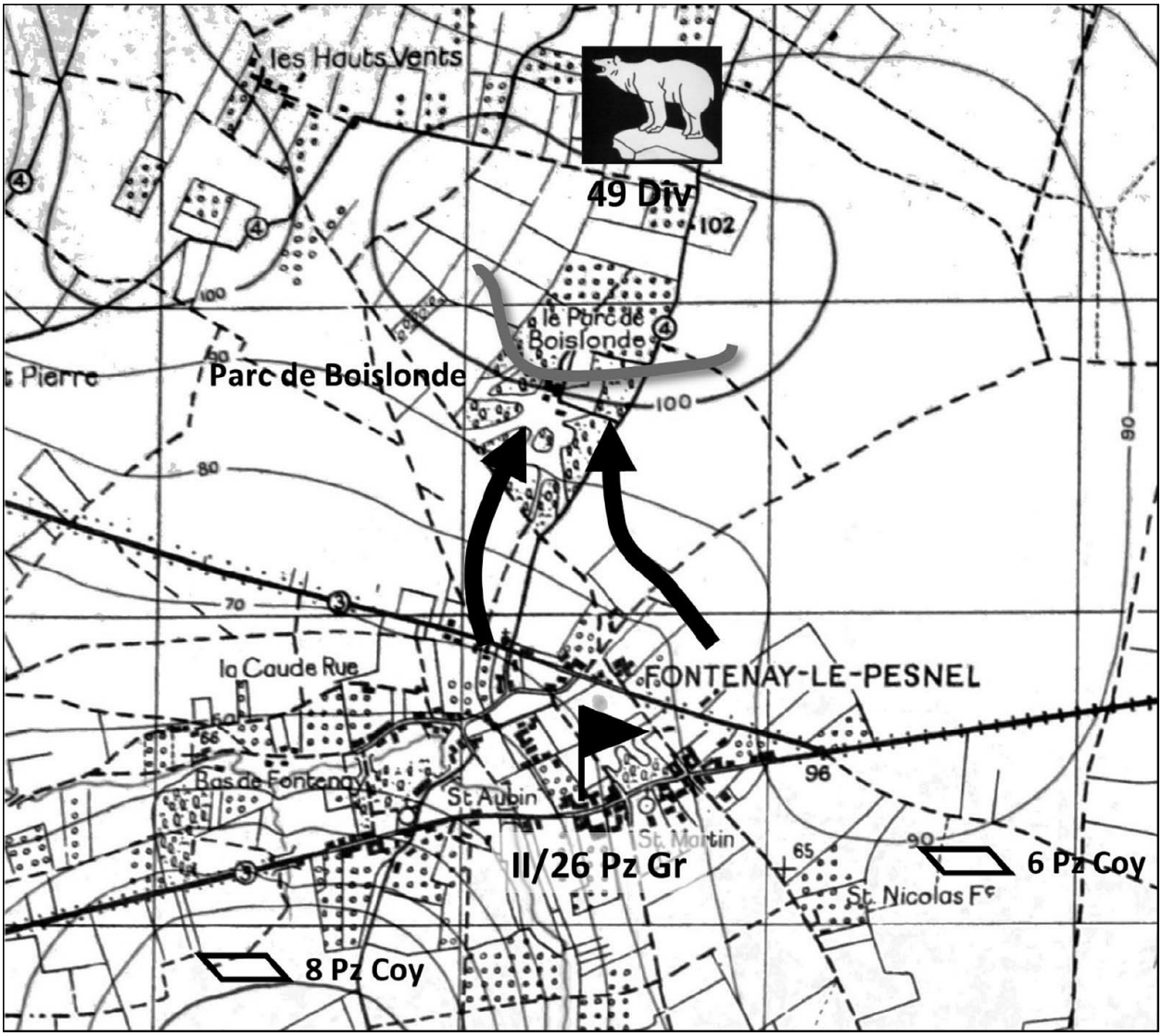
> defensive positions and reached a point behind the slope south-east of Hill 102. We were not able to drive the enemy out of the Parc de Boislonde. During this attack the panzer companies achieved the following hits:
>
> - The 6th Company knocked out three Sherman and one Churchill tanks and five anti-tank guns
> - The 8th Company knocked out two Sherman tanks.
>
> 2330 hours withdrawal of both companies: the 6th Company to its original position 1km north of Rauray and the 8th Company to the positions 1.5km north-west to Point 75. Total loss of one tank per Company:
>
> - Panzer no. 645 of 6th Company
> - Panzer no. 816 of 8th Company.

It was in fact a bitter fight and the forward company of Siebken's battalion was only driven out of the orchard at a very high cost to the British, who with the benefit of their usual mass of artillery fire were able to break up the counterattack by the rest of the battalion.

Obersturmbannführer Mohnke was not prepared to let Parc de Boislonde at the tip of a salient remain in British hands and ordered it to be retaken by Olböter's III Battalion the following day. II Panzer Battalion recorded in their war diary:

> 1235 hours: heavy fire strike by our artillery on the Parc de Boislonde's small wooded area. After the fire strike two armoured infantry companies launched an attack (dismounted) with the panzer support of the 6th and 8th Companies. We did not manage to capture the small wooded area.

An *Unterscharführer* inspects a knocked-out Sherman that has taken a hit in the rear, probably from a *Panzerfaust*.



The Fontenay-Parc de Boislonde area.

Inevitably the attack attracted the attention of a British Air Observation Auster, but a *Wirbelwind* quad-barrelled anti-aircraft gun covering the 6th Company shot it down. ‘The aircraft crashed on Hill 102. Its two-man crew was killed.’

> 1645 hours: another fire strike by our artillery on the small wooded area.
> 1700 hours: repeated infantry attacks [by the 26th *Panzergrenadiers*] with panzer support against the Parc de Boislonde. Our right flank

> succeeded in entering the small wooded area, but we again failed to capture it but covered the infantry back to their original positions. A further advance was repulsed by heavy defensive fire. During this combat the 6th Company successfully knocked out four Shermans, despite heavy artillery fire. There were no [panzer] losses on our side.

This simple note belies the savage fighting, which was a repeat of the previous day's struggle. The two forward British companies were overrun by the *Hitlerjugend* with platoons being surrounded and destroyed before the *panzergrenadiers* were forced back. The British battalion lost 16 officers and 220 men in Parc de Boislonde in the two-day battle.[3] Counter-attacks were proving to be disproportionately expensive especially to the *panzergrenadiers*, but the panzers also suffered casualties to both men and equipment. General Barker reflected on the nature of the close-quarter fighting around Parc de Boislonde, where the *panzergrenadiers*

> are lobbing grenades into the tank turrets and putting sticky bombs[4] on which [the tank crews] find disconcerting. The Boche have dug in and are going to be difficult to move. They lie doggo in the ditches and then appear in the rear shooting everyone up. The Boche is quite fanatical in front of us and they are fighting excellently, with great skill.

The panzer battalion's war diary records:

> *Oberscharführer* Kastner was severely wounded by shell fragments. In the 6th Company a number of panzers were damaged during the heavy artillery fire, which need repairing by the workshop company.
>
> Ammunition expenditure: 100 high-explosive shells, 50 armour-piercing rounds, 1,000 anti-aircraft rounds …

Following the fighting around Parc de Boislonde, the 49th Division pulled back into Cristot, leaving only a screen of outposts supported by tanks forward. Consequently, having only Allied aircraft, artillery and patrols to contend with, the *Hitlerjugend's* left flank was 'quiet'.

The ruins of Château Boislonde testify to the severity of the fighting.

The *Hitlerjugend*'s Repair and Recovery Capability

The fact that the *Hitlerjugend* fielded so many panzers despite the numbers knocked out was a puzzle for Allied intelligence officers, especially as they knew that there were few replacements getting through to the division. The capability of the *Instandsetzungstruppe* (repair troops) was the answer.

Hubert Meyer stressed that during the formation of the division, 'special attention was paid to the setting up of the repair services, since it was expected that panzer losses would not be made up by replacements for a very long time.' He goes on to say that 'the backbone of the repair establishment was made up of well experienced mechanics from reserved occupations.'*

German procedure when dealing with vehicle casualties was fundamentally different to that of the Allies. Commanders would keep vehicles as far forward in the repair chain as possible, reluctant to part with them as they might never be replaced. German mechanics became adept at making and mending, as they could not rely on a supply of increasingly scarce spare parts.

In theory the repair section for a Panther company had twenty-six tradesmen to ensure that repairs were carried out as far forward as possible. Men, tools and spare parts were

wherever possible carried in cross-country-capable vehicles. Only when repairs were expected to exceed sixteen hours' work or require heavy machinery, i.e. a crane, would the vehicle casualty be backloaded to the second line, the regimental workshop company. Drivers and co-drivers were required to stay with the vehicle to provide additional manpower.

Experience on the Eastern Front showed that an overhaul of repair, spares availability and recovery resources was necessary. Up to this point recovery was carried out by the 18-tonne Sd.Kfz.9 with several being required to tow or winch a Panzer IV or Panther and there were never enough recovery panzers (*Bergerpanzers*), but cannibalization of vehicles for spares remained commonplace.

A Panther undergoing front-line repairs.

One of the Panzer Regiment's tradesmen.

A pair of Sd.Kfz.9 recovery vehicles working in tandem to pull a Tiger.

In the 12th SS Panzer Regiment, due to shortages of manpower (for example the Panzer IV battalion only had two of its four repair platoons), first- and second-line resources were shared between the two panzer battalions. Third-line repair was provided by the Divisional *Instandsetzung* Battalion.

Another deficiency was the lack of the two Panther *Bergerpanzers* and only seven instead of the established twenty-three Sd.Kfz.9s. During the campaign two powerfully-engined British Cromwells, with their turrets removed, fulfilled this role.†

Taking all the problems of the supply of spares, lack of manpower and equipment into account, the ability of the *Hitlerjugend*'s *Instandsetzungstruppe* to maintain and repair so many panzers in the field is nothing short of remarkable.

Eastern Front experience had shown that non-panzer commanders would give little or no time to routine maintenance, particularly on long approach marches, to the detriment of serviceable panzers. Contrary to popular belief, this was a significant factor in the Panther's reliability record. The serviceability figures point to the need for routine crew maintenance having been clearly understood in the *Hitlerjugend*.

*It is known that such skilled men were recruited from industry in quantity. They provided a highly-skilled workforce that the young *HJ* soldiers would not have been able to deliver on their own with the restricted training time available.

†These were almost certainly tanks of the County of London Yeomanry abandoned or lightly damaged during Michael Wittmann's action at Villers Bocage in mid-June 1944.

Throughout the Normandy campaign, the number of panzers that Germans could deploy in battle was a puzzle to Allied intelligence officers: their availability simply didn't tally with the number of hits claimed, even after allowing for double counting, exaggeration, etc. With the lack of replacement panzers, the division's workshop companies almost performed miracles. The ability of the *Instandsetzungstruppe* (repair) and unit *Werkstatt-Kompanien* (workshop companies) to recover and repair the Panzer IVs and Panthers was indeed crucial to sustaining the division in action.

As the invasion had been expected in the Pas-de-Calais, Army Group B's logistics were established in that area and, as a result, supply columns had a long journey to Normandy, which included the problematic crossing of the Seine. The Allies sought to disrupt logistic traffic and consequently the *Hitlerjugend*'s logisticians located in the forests of Grimbosq and Cinglais south of Caen were usually short of supplies to send forward. *Sturmmann* Decker of the 25th *Panzer-grenadiers* provides an insight into some of the practicalities of life for German infantrymen at the front during this phase of the Battle of Normandy:

> Disruption on the railways caused by Allied bombing and increased partisan activity meant supplies were no longer reaching the fighting troops at the front. As a result, we were given permission to enter French houses and to take whatever was necessary for personal use, such as clean underwear and so on, but nothing more. We were not allowed to take any more than was absolutely essential … I can remember cutting up a bedsheet and wrapping the strips around my feet because I didn't have any socks. Fortunately, I had one chap in my mortar team who could always find food, so we never went hungry, as he always returned with a chicken, a duck, a rabbit, whatever he could find.
>
> One evening we came across an abandoned French farmhouse and went inside to have a look around and discovered a bed, which we hadn't seen for some time, so we thought we would have a couple of hours' rest. Of course, we weren't allowed to take our clothes off, so,

while some of the men made themselves comfortable on the floor, one of the lads and I jumped up and lay down on the bed. It wasn't long before we regretted our decision, as no sooner had we warmed up than we were bitten alive. The damned bed was full of fleas; no wonder it had been left behind. We ended up sleeping on the floor with the others, all of whom had a good laugh at our expense.

Conditions in the field meant we were unable to wash or clean our uniforms regularly and this led to many of us catching lice. The lice used to gather in the crotch of our trousers and drive us mad. When we had time, we would remove our trousers, turn them inside out and hold the crotch over a lighted candle. This was a horrendous job, but it killed most of the little blighters. When we were finally taken prisoner, one of the first things they did was to delouse us with DDT. They sprayed every nook and cranny; they had to.[5]

In common with most military organizations, whenever possible the *Hitlerjugend* habitually attempted to recover those soldiers who had been killed for burial. More often than not they were buried by the company quartermaster sergeant and his men. *Oberscharführer* Schwabe recorded that having delivered his supplies at night:

On the return journey we took the bodies of those comrades that had been killed and collected half of the identity disk and the personal effects for return to their families. The supply battalion would bury bodies at an easily identifiable spot such as crossroads and a sketch map would be drawn so they could be located later on, normally in individual graves but when there were too many in a common grave. Every soldier was wrapped in a canvas sheet and graves were marked by a wooden or iron cross.

Company commanders would write to families explaining the circumstance of their loss. These where possible were delivered by hand by a Waffen-SS officer. Records were regularly sent back with full details of the dead and wounded.

On the eve of the next British offensive the *Hitlerjugend* had suffered heavy losses, particularly among the *panzergrenadiers*, virtually without

replacement. They had listed some 2,500 casualties in two and a half weeks' fighting and equipment losses were no less severe. For example, on 24 June the division had operational fifty-eight Panzer IVs from an establishment of ninety-four and forty-four Panthers out of the original sixty-three. As referred to above, about 50 per cent of the losses were under repair.[6]

A field grave of an unknown SS soldier in Normandy.

Operations MARTLET and EPSOM

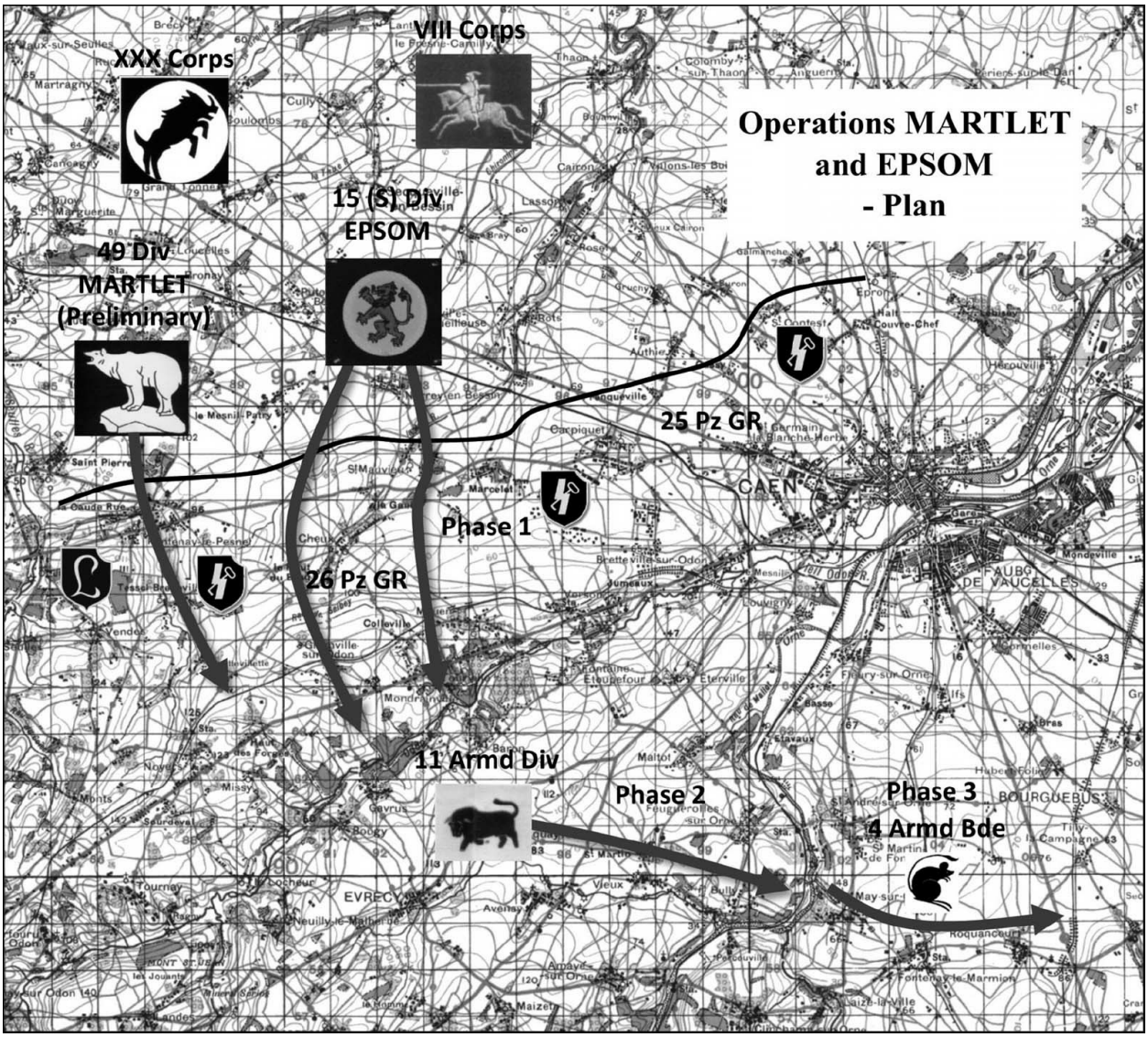
Montgomery's aim was to launch another offensive, originally on 22 June, which would place the British Second Army on the open country well south of Caen where they would be able to continue to exert pressure on the Germans, fixing the bulk of the panzers in the east. This would serve to keep them away from the US First Army and the capture of Cherbourg. Such an offensive would also provide space in the congested British beachhead for

airfields and the development of the logistic infrastructure.[7]

Even though II SS Panzer Corps and the *Leibstandarte* were concentrating around Paris, until infantry divisions were released from the Pas-de-Calais and had completed their march to Normandy, the *Hitlerjugend*, in common with the other panzer divisions in theatre, was compelled to hold ground rather than prepare for Rommel's planned offensive. Increasingly short of men and with a long front to hold, the 26th *Panzergrenadiers*, reinforced by Panzer Pioneers, against whom the expected blow would fall, were thinly spread indeed, with little defensive depth beyond II Panzer Battalion. The stoutly-built villages that dotted the battle area, however, surrounded by embanked paddocks and orchards, offered opportunities for the construction of a series of strongpoints. As every member of the Waffen-SS, no matter what his trade or employment, was first and foremost a fighting soldier, members of supporting arms contributed to the defence. The two artillery battalions based around the villages of Cheux and Le Haut du Bosq also produced strongpoints in depth, as did forward logistic elements. Hubert Meyer also observed that the Panzer Pioneers, in what was to be the centre of the main Allied attack, built particularly strong defences and dugouts.

The newly-arrived British VIII Corps was to be responsible for the offensive, with I Corps again planning to launch the 51st Highland Division in a limited attack east of the Orne. More importantly, XXX Corps was to launch a preliminary attack by the 49th Division and 8th Armoured Brigade on the dominating Rauray Spur just to the west of VIII Corps' main assault. This was to draw in the *Hitlerjugend*'s reserves, i.e. Wünsche's panzer regiment or, as Montgomery put it, to 'unbalance the enemy'. Further west the 50th Division (around Tilly) and the US First Army would also be in action.

VIII Corps' main attack would be delivered by the 15th Scottish Division and 31st Tank Brigade, which were to break through the *Hitlerjugend*'s defences. In the second phase the 11th Armoured Division would exploit across the Odon and Hill 112 to the River Orne, where the 4th Armoured Brigade was to take over and form a bridgehead on the open ground south to Falaise. As the Allies prepared, the experienced campaigners in the ranks of the *Hitlerjugend* recognized all the signs of a coming offensive.



The Allied MARTLET-EPSOM offensive.

The Rauray Spur: 25 June 1944

The attack of the 49th Division fell on the boundary between the *Hitlerjugend* and *Panzer Lehr*, which was held by two battalions, one from each division. III/26th *Panzergrenadiers* were reinforced by the regiment's recce and pioneer companies and backed up by *Hauptsturmführer* Siegel's 8th Company Panzer IVs. They were to face the seemingly overwhelming force available in the opening move of Montgomery's offensive: in this case the enemy had an advantage of more than 3:1 in infantry and 13:1 in tanks, not to mention a huge superiority in artillery.

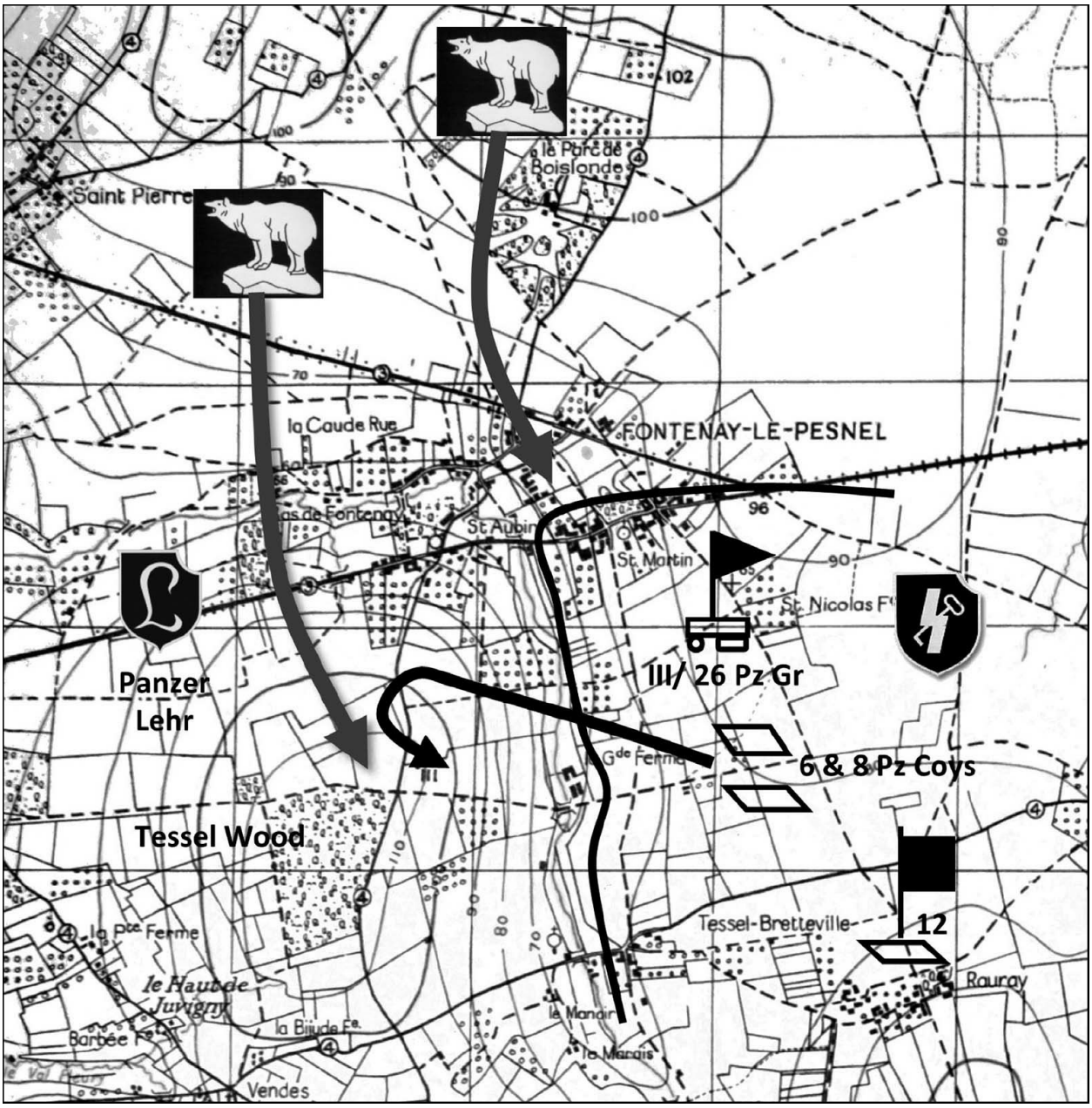
Obergrenadier Kemple, a signaller in a battery supporting III/26 SS

Panzer-grenadiers, described the opening of the offensive:

> It had been quiet for some days and we had dug in our observation post deeply near the village of Fontenay and felt secure from artillery. The quiet could not last and at 0300 hours on 25 June the enemy barrage opened. It lasted for three hours, during which we could not communicate on the radio.
>
> The terrible fire moved on to the rear at about 0600 hours, to be replaced by smoke and a machine-gun barrage over our trench. The smoke was thick, and we could not get through to the gun position, so despite the continuing fire a couple of us had to go out to repair our telephone line. We covered 300–400 metres on our stomachs [fixing breaks] and reached the road where fortunately the overhead crossing was intact. After a rest we crawled on, but suddenly enemy tanks were less than 300 metres away and firing. We jumped up and ran, making it safely back to the command post, where we found the line working.

The British infantry, who had been hampered by their own smoke, were not having it all their own way. With communications now working, the 105mm guns of I/12th Artillery Regiment were in action,[8] along with Mohnke's 13th Infantry Gun Company and of course the battalions' mortars. Moving in the open, the 49th Division's infantry made slow progress during the morning against III/26th *Panzergrenadiers* who were forced back, but after hand-to-hand fighting in the village, they were able to hold Fontenay south of the main road with only the loss of the western part of the village.

One of the division’s 75mm anti-tank guns and a knocked-out Panther in Fontenay.



The fighting around Fontenay, 25 June 1944.

Against *Panzer Lehr* to the west the enemy had greater success. Out of radio contact with Mohnke and divisional headquarters, *Sturmbannführer* Olböter was in trouble and told a reconnaissance battalion officer who had run the gauntlet of enemy fire to make contact:

> Tell Gerd [Bremer] he must help us at all costs, we are in a very bad way! I can only just hold on and I had to withdraw my left flank an hour ago. There is a gap right up to the Chestnut [Tessel] Wood. I can't do

any more; my casualties are too high.

The division, however, was able to launch a counter-attack before Olböter's flank was turned by the British advance on Tessel Wood. During the afternoon, the Reconnaissance Battalion and the panzers of the 8th and 9th companies, well supported by artillery, plunged into the flank of the British infantry and tanks. Grenadier Webber recalled:

> As the last *Nebelwerfer* shells fell, we were on them. Several enemy tanks were burning, and we had taken them by surprise. Tommy infantry disappeared as we moved forward.[9] But it wasn't long before it was our turn for the shells, and we dove into cover. Soon we had the order to return to our starting-place, taking wounded comrades with us.

The panzer regiment claims to have knocked out a total of seven armoured fighting vehicles during this counter-attack, which left the 49th Division with only a toehold in the northern end of Tessel Wood.

Having dealt with the threat to the left flank but still under pressure in the village, Olböter swung his flank back to a new line on the Bordel stream south of Fontenay. Here the *panzergrenadiers* earned the respect of panzer commander *Hauptsturmführer* Siegel:

> During the enemy artillery strikes they sheltered in their trenches, often for half an hour at a time. They endured a hail of shell splinters, which were joined by branches from explosions in treetops and chunks of brick from the buildings. At the moment, however, when the enemy infantry's fire heralded their attack, the grenadiers rose up out of their trenches … machine guns and steel helmets faced the enemy. There was no shooting until the enemy with flat helmets were moving about in the chaos of the houses and streets as ammunition was limited. But when they were almost within touching distance, bursts of machine-gun fire came from the German trenches they thought to be destroyed. A few of these bursts were normally sufficient to end the enemy's attack.

A *Nebelwerfer* 41 in action. Note the size of the projectile.

Meanwhile, the Panthers of the 2nd and 4th Companies had been ordered to drive the enemy out of their lodgement in the western portion of Fontenay and the hedges further west. The I Battalion war diary records:

> At 1300 hours two platoons from each of the 2nd and 4th Companies departed for Fontenay. *Untersturmführer* Flammig … reported by radio: 'A sunken road is in front of me, cannot get in the village.' Panzer no. 427 of *Unterscharführer* Sedat was already stuck in the sunken road. In addition to this, a watercourse was stretching across the direction of attack, which formed an anti-tank obstacle. A new order came from the Regiment: 'The company is to cross the [Bordel] stream in Tessel-Bretteville, and again attack Fontenay and the hills north of the village, to the left of this stream!'
>
> The attack had to be aborted because the enemy proved to be too strong. Tank no. 217 was a total loss. The Adjutant, *Untersturmführer* Heinz Schroder, was missing.
>
> Panzer no. 438 was a total loss due to a hit from an anti-tank gun. Panzers no. 236 and 427 had to be abandoned because of anti-tank gun

hits on the final drive and the running gear.[10,11]

On the evening of 25 June the 7th Battalion, Duke of Wellingtons' attacked Fontenay, but succeeded only in expanding the lodgement in the village. While the *Hitlerjugend* had been forced back their line was unbroken, but above all the 26th *Panzergrenadiers* and supporting panzers had prevented the 49th Division from occupying the Rauray Spur, which overlooked the 15th Scottish Division's axis of advance for the following day.

Standartenführer Kurt Meyer and his divisional staff were, overnight on 25/26 June, convinced that the attack on Fontenay was the harbinger of things to come; the artillery firepower assembled by the British suggested much more than a limited attack. *Obersturmführer* Wünsche was already assembling the panzers around Rauray for a counter-attack that morning, which was to be coordinated with *Panzer Lehr*. At the same time the 49th Division was preparing to resume the advance towards Rauray. Kurt Meyer recalled details of the resulting clash:

> Dawn was already rising, and everything was still quiet. I was with Max Wünsche near Rauray and watched the last Panzer roll into the assembly area … It can't be long now before the deadly dance continues.
>
> German artillery batteries are firing barrages and English fighter-bombers roar above and fire their rockets howling into Rauray; the battle of matériel started. The panzers advance to the front and the attack initially goes well but is stalled by an English counter-attack. It turns into a battle of tank versus panzer which was fought with great determination.

This was not a counter-attack but a deliberate attack on Rauray; the two attacks had almost run into each other. Meyer continued:

> The broken ground, broken by hedges, did not allow our panzers to use their guns' longer range and the lack of *panzergrenadiers* became particularly noticeable. The heavy enemy artillery fire prevents co-operation and makes it almost impossible to command the action but there was no sound of battle east of Rauray. All the fighting was to the west.

> Again, giveaway columns of smoke hang in the sky, each marking the destruction of a panzer … It started to rain. ‘Thank God,’ I thought, ‘this protects us from the fighter-bombers.’

The attacks had stalled but the 49th’s attack on Rauray had served Montgomery’s purpose of drawing the panzers away to the west.

A *Sturmmann* (lance corporal) of the 12th *Hitlerjugend* SS Panzer Division.

Operation EPSOM: 26 June 1944

The morning of 26 June dawned grey and wet, precluding the planned Allied bomber strike. Nonetheless, with more than 700 guns of all calibres, the

Scottish infantry expected to have been blasted through the *Hitlerjugend*'s defences by the opening bombardment. Kurt Meyer described what it was like:

> The earth seemed to open and swallow us. All hell had been let loose. I lay in a ditch alongside a road, listening to the din of battle. There was no pause in the artillery barrage. All telephone lines had been cut and radio communications with Divisional Headquarters and my units no longer worked … I tried unsuccessfully to analyse the sounds of battle and all I heard was the continual cracking of rifles and machine guns and the crashing of exploding shells, mixed with the noise of panzer tracks.

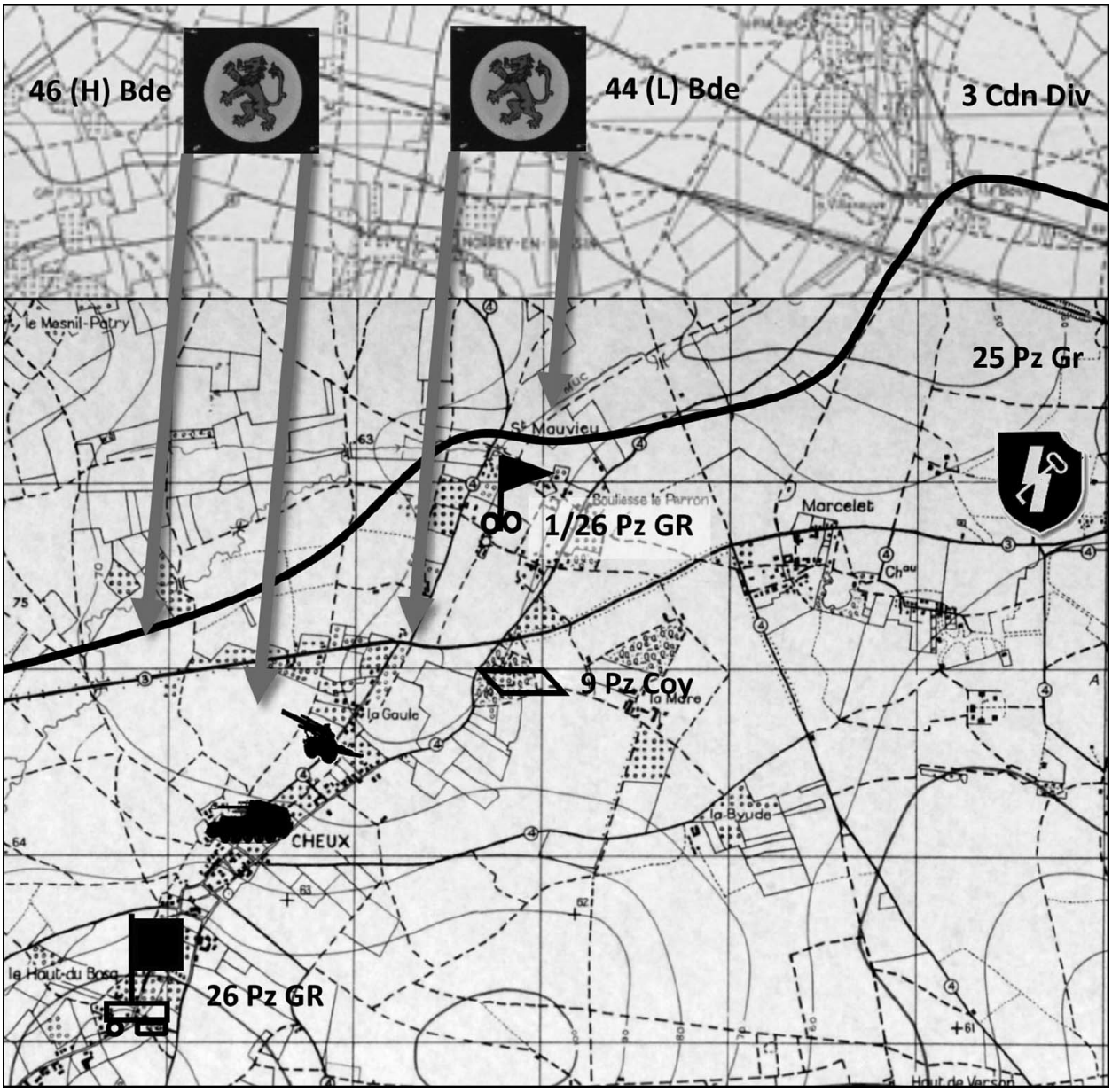
Meyer realized that the wider offensive had opened and ordered *Obersturmbannführer* Wünsche to call off his attack on Tessel Wood. Wünsche was to hold the dominating Rauray position, 'the cornerstone of the division's defences', at all costs and to send II Battalion's panzer companies back to their defensive positions behind the 26th *Panzergrenadiers* as quickly as possible. Meyer then drove at speed back to his headquarters in Verson. Fortunately for him the Allied fighter-bombers, which had been active earlier, were grounded by low cloud and rain.

Meanwhile, the enemy's barrage 'stood for ten minutes on its opening line', which coincided with the *Hitlerjugend*'s outposts. Under cover of the exploding shells, the British infantry and tanks moved forward from their forming-up place and crossed the start line into battle.

At 0730 hours, as the infantry closed up to the line of the barrage, it started to creep forward at a rate of 100 yards in three minutes across the open Mue valley. The mixture of smoke and damp air, as had happened the previous day, produced a thick fog in the valley. The infantry became disordered and the supporting tanks were separated from them as they struggled to find their way around the German minefields, and several tanks became casualties to unmarked Canadian mines. Meanwhile, in the murk the Scottish infantry blundered into the *Hitlerjugend*'s outpost line concealed in the crops forward of St Manvieu, where short, sharp engagements at close range resulted. The outposts were overwhelmed and driven in, with the Scottish infantry fighting

their way through the paddocks and orchards around the village. Once the enemy gained a toehold in the farms on the northern outskirts of St Manvieu, *Obersturmführer* Hartung's 4th Company fell back to battalion headquarters in the centre of the village. *Sturmmann* Kalke was a battalion signaller in the château:

> The artillery fire was constantly increasing, finally falling in the middle of the village. Explosions hit the gardens, directly ahead of the entrance to the command post. The building was shaken by hits. Between the detonations of shells, we could hear the short, harsh barking of tank guns. The battalion headquarters staff had taken shelter in the cellar. Only a few of us remained in the upper levels. Radio contact with the companies was lost … a messenger from the 2nd Company came into the command post through the smoke and fumes of explosions. He was wounded … and reported [that] his company was engaged in bitter hand-to-hand fighting and had been overrun. The enemy had broken through … and were now concentrating strong tank and infantry forces against the 1st Company.



Attack of the 15th Scottish Division.

Also in the château was one of the division's *Kriegsberichters*:[12]

> Heavier and heavier, the shells from the tanks hammered the château's gardens. The beams of the houses were splitting, bricks were flying from the walls. The earth was trembling … For almost three hours, they fired salvo after salvo on the main line of defence beyond St Manvieu and the village itself. Foxholes collapsed, machine guns were smashed, and men were mercilessly ripped apart.

The enemy broke through the positions and overran St Manvieu. Like a pack of hungry wolves, they surrounded the village. The handful of us in the battalion command post could count fifteen Shermans[13]… Whoever had weapons left to fight with was sent into action in the village, messengers, clerks and orderlies.

… The battalion command post had suddenly become an important bastion – and it had no heavy weapons, only sub-machine guns and rifles, with *panzerfausts* and magnetic mines. But there were two mortars still sitting in the village and their crews had twenty-five bombs left. These they fired amongst the oncoming infantry and tanks, causing confusion. SS sharpshooters crept to the hedges and walls and fired at the [British tank] commanders who came out of their hatches too soon. Some of the tanks turned away. They assumed the strongpoint to be much stronger and did not dare break in. But the calm did not last long, as the tanks returned and fired from all barrels. They picked the house as their target and damaged it so badly that the wounded had to be carried out.

One of the tanks was a hated Churchill Crocodile, which had halted in the gardens behind the château, just outside the battalion headquarters:

Then there was a shout of alarm within the doggedly defending platoon. A flame-thrower tank was dominating the entrance to the command post. ‘That tank has to go,’ ordered our commander.

Unterscharführer Durr had heard the order and did not hesitate. ‘I’ll go,’ he said and took a *panzerfaust* and went to recce the situation. It was difficult to get close to the tank, as it was dominating the ground on three sides. *Unterscharführer* Durr jumped across the inner wall of the garden and ran straight at the tank and fired but the *panzerfaust* failed to pierce the tank. Maybe in his excitement he had not taken aim accurately.

A Churchill Crocodile in action ‘flaming’.

He was hit! Shot in the chest, an angry Durr got to his feet, ran back and picked up another *panzerfaust* and rushed up to the tank again. This time he aimed at the tracks, and the explosion ripped them apart. Again, Durr was the target of the tank’s machine gun and crawling, he made his way back. He saw a magnetic mine and grabbed it, but a comrade wanted to stop him going back.

For a third time Durr set out, running and stumbling, towards the tank, paying no attention to the bullets. He placed the mine and was about to get away when it fell to the ground. He grabbed it again and held it against the tank as it exploded.

Unterscharführer Emil Durr, who lost both legs in the explosion, was recovered from beside the Crocodile with a damaged track while the British had temporarily withdrawn, but he died of his wounds four hours later. Durr was the first *Hitlerjugend* NCO to be awarded the Knight’s Cross.[14]

With the situation in St Manvieu critical, as recorded by *Sturmmann* Kalke:

SS *Sturmbannführer* Krause ordered the adjutant [*Untersturmführer* Holzel] to establish contact with a panzer company located in the La Byude [*sic*] area [a mile south] and request an immediate counter-attack. When the artillery fire slackened a little, three of us left the command post by a rear entrance at short intervals. A small thick wood offered us

cover … We found ourselves in a grain field, which gave us some cover … and we reached the 9th Panzer Company. The company commander flatly refused a counter-attack, as without supporting infantry, panzers were not suited to fighting in a village. *Untersturmführer* Holzel set up a new strongpoint with a few stragglers at the edge of St Manvieu.

Unterscharführer Durr and the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross.

Even though the headquarters in St Manvieu was eventually flamed by another Crocodile and the enemy occupied the village, fighting there continued until darkness drew a veil over the battlefield, but by then the survivors of I Battalion had slipped away.

In the centre of the Scots' attack was the objective of Cheux but to reach it, they would have to fight through the 12th SS Pioneers' well-prepared defensive positions. The pioneers' supporting panzer companies, the 5th and 7th, which had been sent west to Rauray for the dawn counter-attack, retuned too late to occupy their original hull-down positions in tank scrapes and were

forced to fight the enemy tanks in open terrain from hedge to hedge. They were supported by artillery in Cheux and their 105mm shells knocked out several Churchills and damaged others.

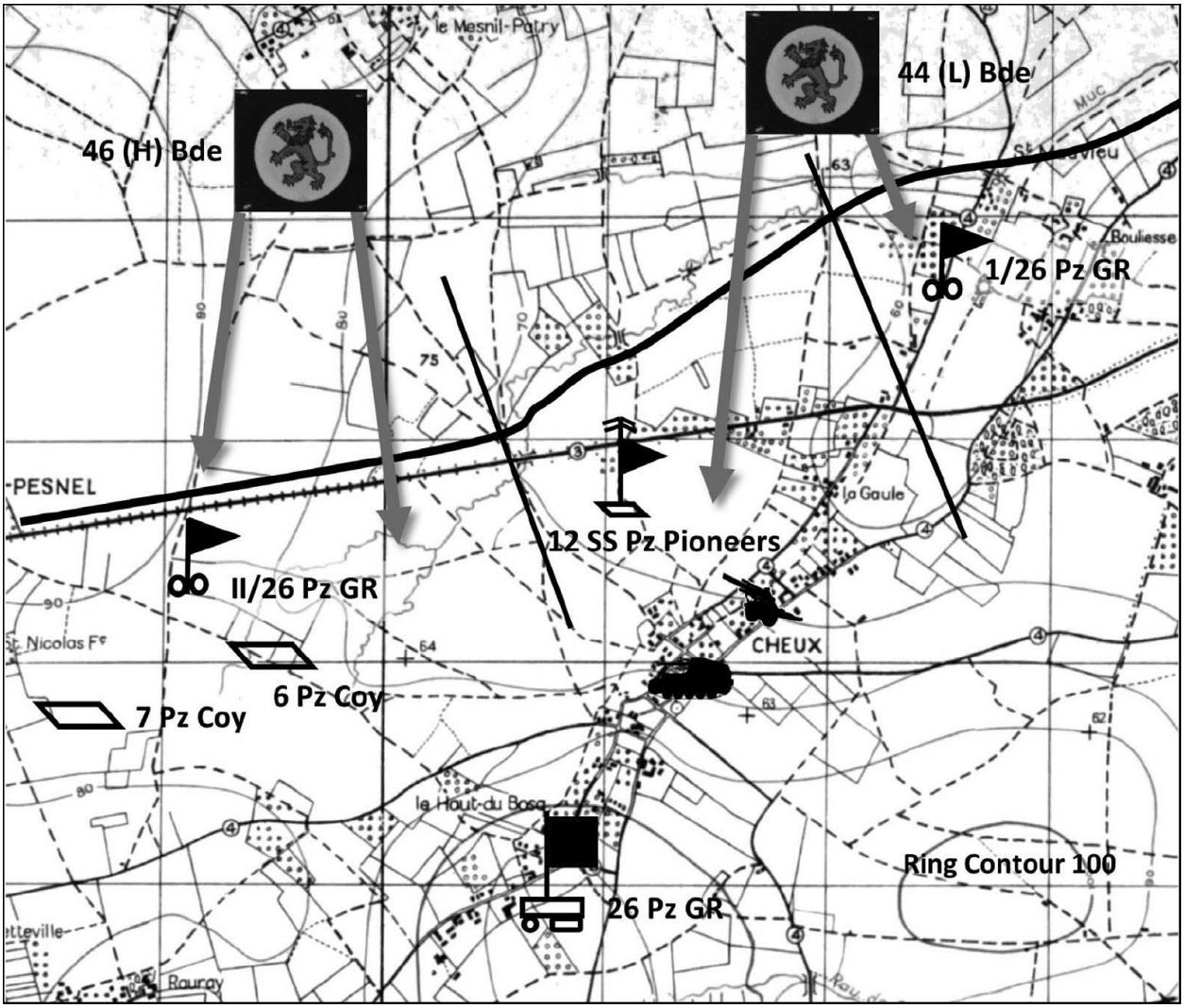
The pioneers had used all their field engineering skills to prepare deep shelters that were both well camouflaged and well sited. Consequently, many of the SS soldiers survived the barrage and were missed by the first wave of attacking infantry and armour. Appearing from their bunkers, they either shot into the rear of the leading wave of Scots infantry or engaged subsequent waves with rifle, machine-gun or *panzerfaust* fire. The VIII Corps war diary described the German reaction in the centre of the attack:

> The enemy was holding his positions and let us pass when he was not directly attacked, overwhelmed or overrun. He only revealed himself when presented promising targets or had himself been spotted. There were numerous points of resistance, which had to be cleared long after objectives had been reached, in the forward as well as the rear areas … It was remarkable that in all cases, that the enemy in these positions fought until the defenders had been killed or the positions captured.

In many cases the battle had indeed bypassed isolated individuals or groups of *Hitlerjugend* and, in several instances over the following days, German signal logs recorded radio contact with groups that had been overrun and presumed lost up to three days earlier. Others managed to return to their own lines under cover of darkness. One of these was the commanding officer of the 12th SS Pioneers and surviving members of his HQ staff, who had last been heard of, with a tank attempting to crush their HQ dugout, at around 0900 hours. *Standartenführer* Kurt Meyer recalled that

> *Sturmbannführer* Muller himself defended his command post bunker against the enemy attacks. A captured pioneer was finally sent into the bunker to ask his comrades to surrender. He preferred to stay there and share with his comrades their fate. The attack went on past the command post after enemy attempts at demolition had badly rocked the bunker to its foundations and it looked like a charnel house. The survivors finally fought their way to our lines at about midnight. They were eventually found completely exhausted near Le Haut du Bosq, after having decided

to have a short rest.



The attack on the 12th SS Panzer Pioneers.

Others fought on from well-concealed positions in bunkers and even in platforms hidden in trees; with rifle and machine gun they fought on until killed or they ran out of ammunition. One particular weapon, the Gewehr 43 rifle and a telescopic sight, particularly enraged the British infantry and engendered a ‘sniper phobia’ among them.[15] German sections each had a sharpshooter and many young riflemen remained hidden, taking on targets long after the fighting had moved on.

With stories of atrocities still circulating, not only were the *Hitlerjugend* disliked by the Scots but they were feared as well for their ruthless dedication

to the cause and intractable determination when fighting, all born out of youth and years of indoctrination. *Oberscharführer* Behrens, himself already a prisoner of war, witnessed the fate of a comrade who fought on until he ran out of ammunition. Coming out of his trench, he smashed his Gewehr 43 and raised his hands but was promptly shot in the head by a tall red-headed soldier.[16]

The Gewehr 43 sharpshooter's rifle.

Those that were taken prisoner regularly told their captors that the Allies would be thrown back into the sea and Germany would still be victorious. Even some of the wounded *Hitlerjugend* soldiers maintained their fanaticism:

> Incredible as it may seem, for some wounded grenadiers being attended by Canadian medics only a few miles away, their capture was far from comfortable. Without exception, not only did they display an overt sense of shame for having been taken alive, but a few chose to die rather than receive a blood transfusion to save their life. These indoctrinated youngsters had learned their racist lessons well, believing that 'Tommy' or American blood would probably be contaminated, as it would not have been segregated from Jewish donors. Nazis to the core, this was a gamble they refused to take, leaving them with little choice other than to pray that their God, the Führer, would spiritually intervene and help them recover.[17]

A Scottish soldier escorting *Hitlerjugend* soldiers into captivity …

… and questioning by VIII Corps intelligence staff.

In another case a female nurse as far up the medical evacuation chain as a field hospital, recalled a *Hitlerjugend* soldier, presumably a pioneer, producing a handful of detonators from a pocket. The British soldier on guard in the ward grabbed the detonators from him while the teenage soldier laughed scornfully at the chaos in the ward. The same nurse reported that

German prisoners, as already highlighted, were often infested with lice.

Against determined resistance by the *Hitlerjugend*, progress by the 15th Scottish Division had been slower than planned. One immediate result was that the Scots lost the bombardment, which marched on as per the fire plan. By the time the infantry reached the young grenadiers' defences, the numbing effect of the artillery fire had worn off and positions were manned. In the necessarily large open gun pits, most of the division's towed anti-tank guns in the path of the barrage were out of action, with guns damaged and crews killed or wounded.

In the centre, despite 7 RTR losing seven tanks to mines, the hamlet of Le Gaul was secured and by 1100 hours two Scottish battalions were reporting having reached the northern end of the straggling village of Cheux. The village was in some low ground and had been the position of batteries of I Battalion 12th SS Artillery Regiment, along with some of the division's logistic troops. Only a short distance further south was the hamlet of Le Haut du Bosq, where Mohnke's headquarters of the 26th *Panzergrenadiers* had been located for most of the previous three weeks.

Artilleryman Herman Bull was in the ruins of Cheux when the enemy arrived:

> I was left behind when the guns were to be taken back beyond the Salby [stream] and when the enemy infantry arrived it was too late for me to go. Beneath the house was the cellar in which we had sheltered from the infernal enemy artillery but above were collapsing walls and floors and rubble everywhere. I was able to move around the ruin of our house and fire at passing Tommies and hide before they could find me. On one occasion when it was raining [German] shells and well, rain, four of them came into the room I was hiding in for shelter, before being ordered to move on. In the afternoon search parties were more organised, so I stopped shooting and waited for dark.[18]

The road through Cheux was for a time the only covered route forward; inevitably the *Hitlerjugend* artillery and mortars shelled the village, which became a choke-point on the British axis of rubble, flooded shell holes, steel shards and burning vehicles. Tanks that attempted to bypass the village were

engaged by the Panzer IVs of the 5th and 7th companies and the British advance confined to covered routes in the valley. As a panzer platoon of the 5th Company redeployed to block them 400 yards south-west of Le Haut du Bosq, '*Unterscharführer*' Hans Junge[19] found that he was moving parallel to some Shermans heading south from Le Haut du Bosq and, as recalled by his platoon commander, *Untersturmführer* Kändler knocked out five of them. For this he was awarded the Iron Cross.

By late morning the Scots were some three hours behind schedule and the 11th Armoured Division was straining at the leash and pressed for a squadron of the Reconnaissance Regiment to be sent forward to prove the route to Cheux, where the 29th Armoured Brigade was to assemble. Meanwhile, to the west, the panzers under Max Wünsche had contained repeated armoured and infantry attacks from Tessel Wood and Fontenay by the 49th Division and it was obvious that the sector where an enemy breakthrough was most likely was in the centre around Cheux. Consequently, the only reserves available in the division were the Escort Company and 15th Recce Company from the 25th *Panzergrenadiers*, whose sector was quiet. The company was dispatched to block progress south from the high ground of 'Ring Contour 100' to the south-east of Cheux.

Obersturmführer Hans and Frau Traudl Junge.

Also on the march from Rauray to join the panzers of the 5th and 7th companies, which were under pressure south of Cheux, were the four operational Panzer IVs of *Hauptsturmführer* Siegel's 8th Company. Siegel wrote:

> After 24 hours in battle the Panzer IVs were being quickly refuelled and rearmed near Rauray. The regimental commander arrived and ordered me to block an enemy breakthrough south-east of Cheux. The situation there was confused and now there was no infantry to go with me. Time was of the essence.
>
> After a quick briefing the crews mount their tanks, close their hatches and turrets swung into battle position. With a last shout of good luck from the commander we were off, but we had only gone a few hundred metres east when we saw enemy tanks crossing our front near Le Haut

du Bosq. We open fire and the armoured vehicles are soon burning with clouds of black smoke. At full speed we cross the next piece of open ground and encounter enemy carriers full of ammunition in the bottom of the valley. We halted where a tall bank gave us protection about 1,000 metres from Cheux. There were only a few soldiers of the 26th *Panzergrenadiers* around us.

The Panzer IV commanded by *Unterscharführer* Kretzschmar of the 5th Panzer Company.

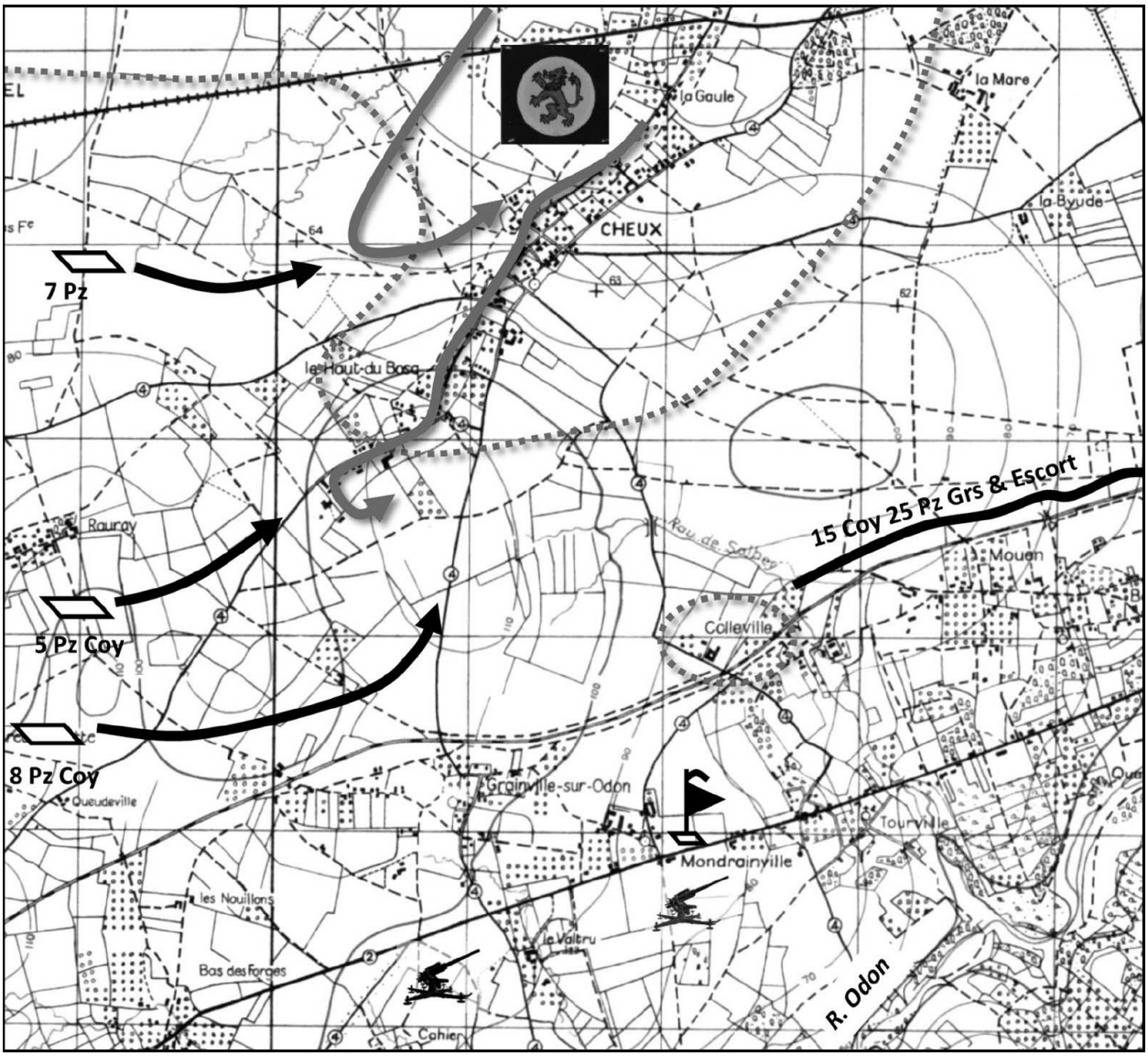
A dangerous gap seemed to have been blocked and the Allied tanks swung

east around the village, but Siegel's panzers were in the front line and there were plenty of Tommies about in the hedgerows. Some close-quarter and hand-tohand fighting in the rain resulted around the panzers. Meanwhile, to the southeast of Cheux, the main weight of the enemy's armour was concentrated in its drive for the Odon bridges and here the *Hitlerjugend*'s line was bolstered as the afternoon wore on with assault guns sent over from the 21st Panzer Division. A combination of these guns, the *Hitlerjugend*'s thinly-spread infantry strong-points, a handful of panzers and *Nebelwerfers* were just containing the advance of two British divisions; they were simply unable to cross the broad expanse of Ring Contour 100 or the Salbey.

Standartenführer Meyer spent most of the day moving from crisis to crisis, only able to do so thanks to the increasingly heavy rain which kept Allied aircraft on the ground. One of his visits was to the redeployed platoons of the 15th Company along the reverse slope of Ring Contour 100 and then on towards Colleville. Meyer later wrote:

> All command and control had become impossible. At that point, I could only be a soldier amongst soldiers. The eyes of the grenadiers lit up when they noticed me moving from section to section. These soldiers were unshakeable. They would not waver or give way.
>
> Soon there was no piece of ground where a round had not exploded. Enemy tank rounds exploded in our lines. Our defensive area was reinforced by two tanks and an anti-tank gun. We clasped the few remaining *Panzerfausts* tightly to our bodies.
>
> A Panzer IV exploded and two Shermans were burning in front of us. The mass of enemy armour gave me the willies. Didn't it border on madness to try to stop this army of steel with a handful of soldiers and a few rifles? It was too late to speculate; there was only one thing left to do – fight.
>
> As a pair of Shermans advanced down a defile, *panzergrenadiers* lay in wait in the cover of blackberry bushes, with their *Panzerfausts* ready. I held my breath, and the exploding shells had suddenly lost their terror. Spellbound we watched the soldiers as they took aim at the leading tank which was advancing further and further towards us with a second tank rolling slowly behind him. They drove on past until the second tank

reached as far as our soldiers. The tanks' gun barrels were pointed in the direction of Verson, but they would never fire again. A soldier fired and his *Panzerfaust* smashed into the second Sherman's side. The tank rolled on a few metres then stopped smoking. The leading tank had also been halted; it lost a track on a mine. Two survivors surrendered.



The blocking action south of Cheux, pm 26 June 1944.

Near Colleville, Meyer joined the divisional supply officer, *Obersturmführer* Meitzel, who was fighting to prevent a breakthrough with a section made up of members of the divisional headquarters:

I was lying on the ground next to the commander when, a few hundred metres away, what remained of the 25th's Recce Company were overrun by British tanks and their supporting infantry. There was nothing we could do to help as the artillery were out of ammunition. The divisional commander knew all of those young soldiers who we knew were fighting their final battle. When I looked across at the *Standartenführer*, I saw he had tears in his eyes. As we drove back to Verson, we found two British tanks less than 200 metres from the divisional headquarters. They had been knocked out by runners from the divisional staff armed with *Panzerfausts*.

The divisional commander Kurt Meyer and his 1a, Hubert Meyer.

A Tiger belonging to the 101st Heavy Panzer Battalion.

Only a handful of enemy tanks had got across the railway line and all were destroyed, including those in Verson. Kurt Meyer recalled that others were prevented from advancing: ‘A new sound suddenly mixed into the hellish concert. A lone Tiger was giving us room to breathe. Its 88mm shells gave the Shermans an unmistakable command to halt. The British turned away; they called off their attack in the direction of Mouen.’

88mm Flak 18/36/37: The Anti-Tank Debate

The infamous, as far as the Allies were concerned, 88mm gun was considerably less effective in Normandy in 1944 than it had been in Russia and in the Western Desert during 1941/42 where, for example, British tanks were lured into well-prepared tank ambushes for wholesale destruction. This tactic worked because at the time, the 88mm outranged British and Soviet tank guns significantly and the British lacked HE rounds. When the Eighth Army received Lend-Lease tanks equipped with the highly effective US 75mm high-explosive round, they had an effective counter.

By 1944 the Germans had produced the 75mm Pak 40, which was relatively cheap to produce in comparison with the Flak 36/37. When dug in its profile was only 18in high, while the Flak 88mm, even when similarly prepared for the ground role, presented a target of 8ft. In facing challenges such as the T34, German antitank guns had also improved significantly, with the Flak 36/37 gun assessed as being only 15 per cent more effective than the Pak 40, which was more than adequate to deal with most Allied tanks.* Post-war analysis considered the 88mm's slight advantage was more than outweighed by its vulnerability in the combat zone, where its relative immobility was also a serious disadvantage.

Additionally, by 1944 the 88mm (Pak 43 and Pak 43/41) was available on a ground carriage, which had a similarly low profile, despite its overall size.

Due to these factors, secondary to the Flak 36/37's anti-aircraft role, was the provision of indirect artillery support rather than anti-tank fire. This secondary role also made up for the shortage of corps and army heavy artillery units. The indirect fire role suited the 88mm as they had a decent range and high-explosive fire support could be provided without moving forward from their flak positions 2 to 3 miles behind the front line. To reflect this priority, III Flak Corps had adequate scales of high-explosive ammunition but lacked significant stocks of anti-tank ammunition.

An 88mm Flak 36/37.

One of the *Hitlerjugend*'s Pak 40s in Normandy.

A Luftwaffe-crewed Flak 36/37 in action against ground targets.

In Normandy General Wolfgang Pickert's III Flak Corps was deployed in its primary role of air defence. Due to a shortage of anti-tank assets in the *Hitlerjugend* due to losses of Pak 40s and the absence of the *Panzerjager* battalion, ground commanders wanted the Luftwaffe-controlled 88mm guns in the anti-tank role. When, however, they were ordered forward, these orders were frequently countermanded as a result of a phone call to Göring, with Sepp Dietrich complaining on several occasions that 'Every time I reposition Flak, someone moves it back!'

The *Hitlerjugend*, however, had three batteries of four Flak 36/37 guns on their establishment, but unlike most Luftwaffe Flak units, their crews were trained for both the ground and anti-aircraft roles and proved to be very effective. There is evidence that some Luftwaffe Flak *Kampfgruppen* were similarly trained, but they were quickly withdrawn from action in Normandy as they were deemed to be ineffective, having suffered heavy losses for little gain at normal battlefield ranges.

* The 6in frontal armour of the Churchill was the exception and it was proof against both the 75mm and 88mm.

A single company of Gordon Highlanders had, however, got across the railway line but were isolated overnight in Colleville.

In the 26th *Panzergrenadiers*' centre, the EPSOM offensive had stalled

with VIII Corps having advanced less than 4 miles, and with two divisions superimposed on each other in what was a narrow corridor, the British would struggle to gain any momentum against the *Hitlerjugend*'s determined defence. On the division's left flank the 12th SS Panzer Regiment had contained the 49th Division, which had only made very limited progress towards Rauray during 26 June, despite panzer companies being stripped away to the Cheux area.

Even though against heavy odds the division had done well to halt the offensive, the question was how long could they contain the enemy? Losses of both men and equipment had been high, with the Pioneer Battalion, for instance, being believed to have been lost and the division reporting just forty-seven serviceable panzers. Overnight I SS Panzer Corps was rushing elements of the corps' Heavy Panzer Battalion and *Kampfgruppen* of the *Leibstandarte* and 2nd SS Panzer Division to bolster the line west of Caen.

During the night of 26/27 June, the division made significant efforts to recover panzers, vehicles and artillery pieces; the latter mostly belonged to II Battalion, 12th SS Artillery Regiment. The 105mm guns had been abandoned in the Salbey valley due to a loss of prime movers in the withdrawal from Cheux. A Panzer IV was dispatched to tow one of the guns back south of the railway line, with the crew being warned to keep the speed and revs low so as not to alert the enemy.

Operation EPSOM: 27 June 1944

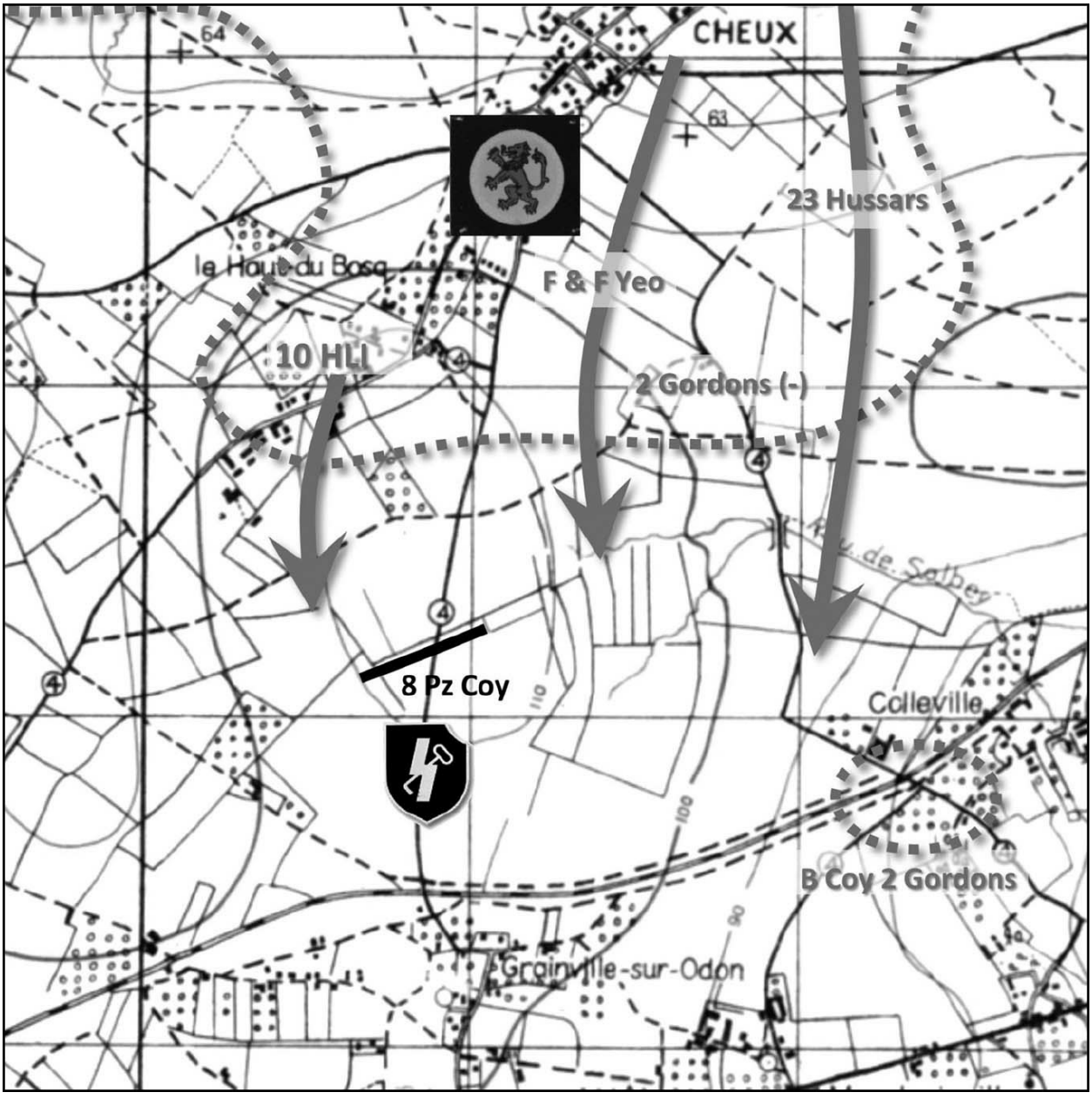
The largely open terrain that the British had advanced over the previous day ended at Ring Contour 100 and the Salbey stream. Beyond these features were the Caen-Vire railway line and a belt of hedgerow country, up to 1,000 yards deep, with a string of villages along the road south-west to Villers Bocage. From the road the ground dropped steeply to the south into the Odon valley, where the river was narrow and fast-flowing, with only a handful of crossing-places for armour. Beyond lay the slopes up to the open plateau of Hill 112.

An leFH 18 105mm gun and camouflage net. The gun was heavy for its calibre.

The 15th Scottish Division renewed their advance to the Odon bridges, with three infantry battalions under grey rainy skies; again, the *Hitlerjugend* would not have to contend with Allied fighter-bombers. Waiting for the enemy, covering the road south from Le Haut de Bosq to Grainville, were Siegel's four Panzer IVs, sited hull-down behind a thick bank, with the silhouette of their turrets concealed by bushes and trees of the hedgerow. At 0730 as the Jocks of the 10th Highland Light Infantry (10 HLI) crossed the crest of Hill 110 into the open, the Panzer IVs opened fire with their coaxial machine guns and drove them to ground. When the supporting Churchill tanks of the 7th RTR, which in tight country were following the infantry, joined the Scots on 110, they were sky-lined and the concealed panzers were able to drive both infantry and tanks back with their fire.[20] The *Hitlerjugend* had blocked the road south to Grainville.

The next attempt by the British was a little further east by the Shermans of

the Fife and Forfar Yeomanry who had been waiting expectantly to exploit the RTR's success. Siegel, realizing the danger of being outflanked, moved to his right and forward but in crossing an open field his Panzer 805 was knocked out and he was wounded but saved by his leather uniform.



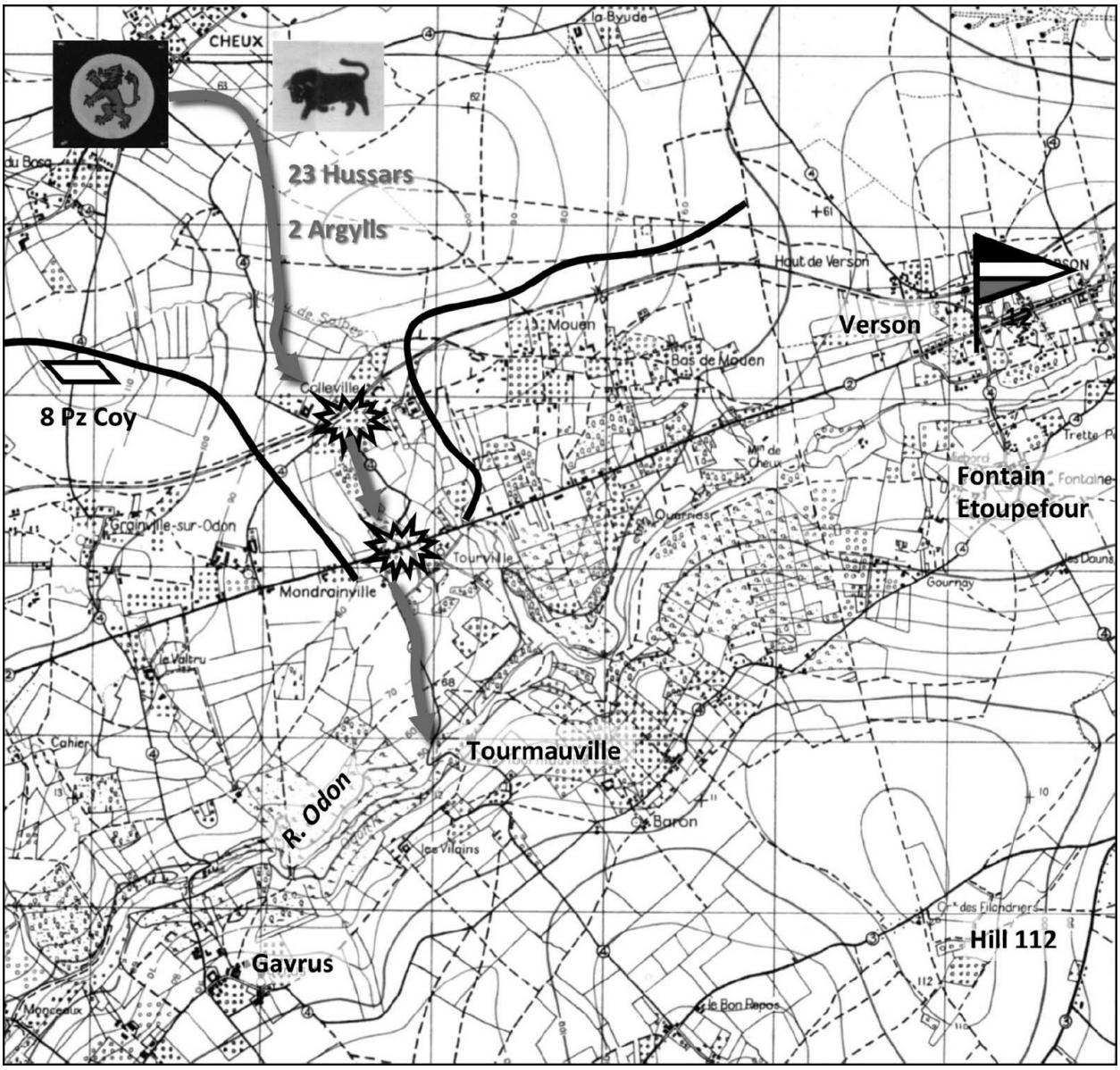
Siegel's blocking position.

With the 10 HLI and 7 RTR blocked, the 2nd Argyles were tasked to go for the all-important Odon bridge. Instead of advancing across the fields, with two companies deployed, they slipped south, on foot, along the road to

Colleville in file, largely concealed by the hedges. Reaching the railway line, they tangled with one of the division's outposts but so thinly spread were the *panzergrenadiers* that the Argyles continued their way to the Caen-Villers Bocage road. They reached it at a point between Mondrainville and Tourville without incident. The road was, however, being patrolled by armoured cars of the Recce Battalion who soon spotted the Argyles dashing across the long straight road. A panzer was summoned and a Mark IV arrived, stopping enemy movement for a time before it was knocked out by one of the Argyles' anti-tank guns that was rushed forward from Cheux. The Scottish battalion, with minor brushes principally with antiaircraft gunners, moved down into the Odon valley, where at 1700 hours they prepared to assault the narrow stone Tourmauville bridge. The bridge, however, was not defended and the companies quickly shook out into all-round defence.

When asked why this bridge and others on the Odon were neither guarded nor blown, *Sturmbannführer* Hubert Meyer said: 'Simple, we needed it for our supplies and reinforcements, as there were so few bridges over the Odon in the division's sector and we didn't have enough grenadiers to spare to guard it, as they were all needed to hold the main defensive line.'

The loss of the Tourmauville bridge by enemy slipping through the division's over-extended front was exacerbated by an armoured regiment joining the Argyles at the bridge. In response to the breakthrough and seizure of the bridge, the divisional headquarters rushed both panzers and *panzergrenadiers* to occupy Hill 112 and Fontaine-Étoupefour, with initially only a single depleted panzer company holding 112. The necessity of redeploying the panzers, however, finally allowed the 49th Division to gain a toehold on the high ground around Rauray and Grainville but around Colleville the fighting in the hedgerows on the route to Tourmauville was bitter.



The loss of the Tourmauville bridge.

The narrow Tourmauville bridge damaged by tanks in the hands of a military policeman from the 15th Scottish Division and an armoured car from 34 Tank Brigade.

What was now known by the Allies as the Scottish Corridor was very narrow and vulnerable, being at this stage less than 2 miles wide at best. One attack on the Corridor during the day came in the form of a company of seventeen Panthers from the 2nd Panzer Division. Initially they had been sent to Rauray, but Max Wünsche, aware of Siegel's situation, sent them on east. Instead of deploying on the high ground overlooking Colleville, without infantry, they blundered into Le Haut du Bosq and Cheux, where they caused

chaos but lost five Panthers at close quarters before being driven off. If this significant reinforcement of Panthers had deployed where intended, they could have blocked the Argyles' advance or at least that of the following Shermans.

That evening *Sturmbannführer* Frey, commanding the 1st SS *Panzergrenadier* Regiment, reported to the new divisional headquarters which had moved to Louvigny. The *Leibstandarte* was slowly arriving in the forests south of Caen, but there was a critical shortage of fuel that kept some battalions sitting inactive despite the crisis. The overriding need to cut the Corridor, however, saw the *Leibstandarte* being committed to battle piecemeal; in this case Frey's two battalions coming under command of the *Hitlerjugend* for a counter-attack from the east. A similar force from the 2nd Panzer and 2nd SS Panzer divisions, *Kampfgruppe* Weidinger, was being assembled for an attack from the west. As a first priority they were to relieve the 12th SS Panzer Regiment south of Le Haut du Bosq and in the Rauray area. Overnight panzer companies from these areas pulled back in good order, but those in the Grainville area withdrew in contact with the enemy. They moved south to the Odon, crossing the river at Gavrus and concentrated at Esquay from where they would deploy to bear the brunt of containing the British offensive on the Odon for several days until II SS Panzer Corps was ready to counter-attack.

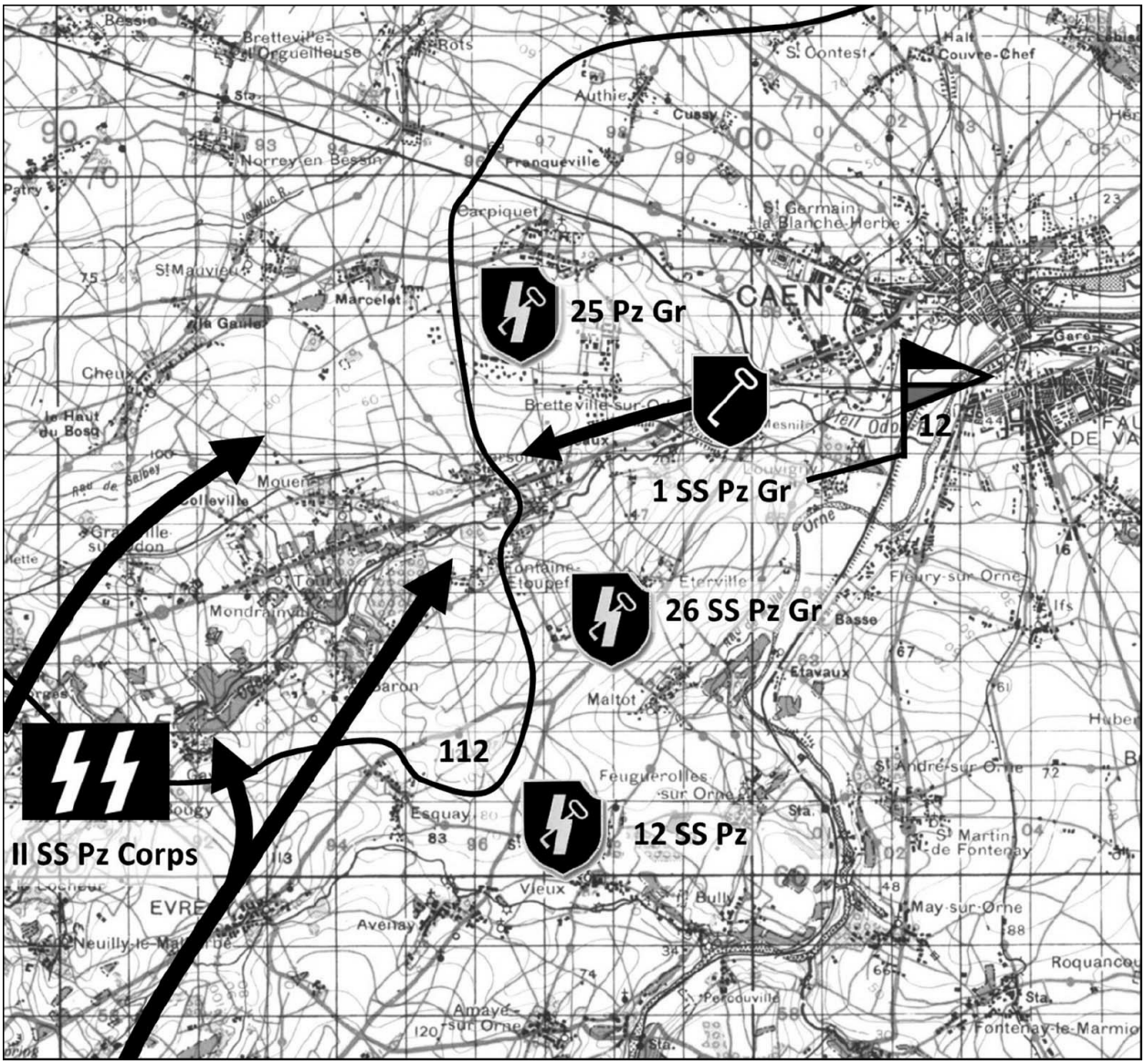
Hauptsturmführer Hans Siegel pictured wearing the Knight's Cross he won for his actions during the British EPSOM offensive.

Kurt Meyer recorded an unusual incident during the day:

> A stranger reported to me as I entered the divisional command post. He introduced himself as a civilian official from the Reich Foreign Minister's staff and asked me to give him precise information on the situation. The minister could no longer understand the constant withdrawals!
>
> Before I could digest this, tank rounds crashed into our ruin. Enemy tanks were in front of our command post once again. Our command post was empty in no time. Everyone was crouching in a trench with his *Panzerfaust*, waiting for further surprises. I didn't see the alleged messenger from the Reich Foreign Minister again! What could he have reported to his superiors?

Operation EPSOM: 28 June 1944

The day did not start well for the ever more thinly-spread *Hitlerjugend*, as at dawn enemy tanks pushed up onto the open slopes of Hill 112. Overnight the British divisions had reinforced the Odon bridgehead with two brigades: infantry to hold the bridgehead and armour to exploit to the Odon. When the tanks advanced, the Shermans were met and halted by anti-tank fire south-east of Baron on the direct route up to the broad plateau. Having been checked, the 23rd Hussars and a company of armoured infantry made a bold flanking move through Baron and the cover of the Odon valley and attacked Hill 112 from the north down the axis of the Roman Road and seized a toehold on the plateau with the aid of surprise.



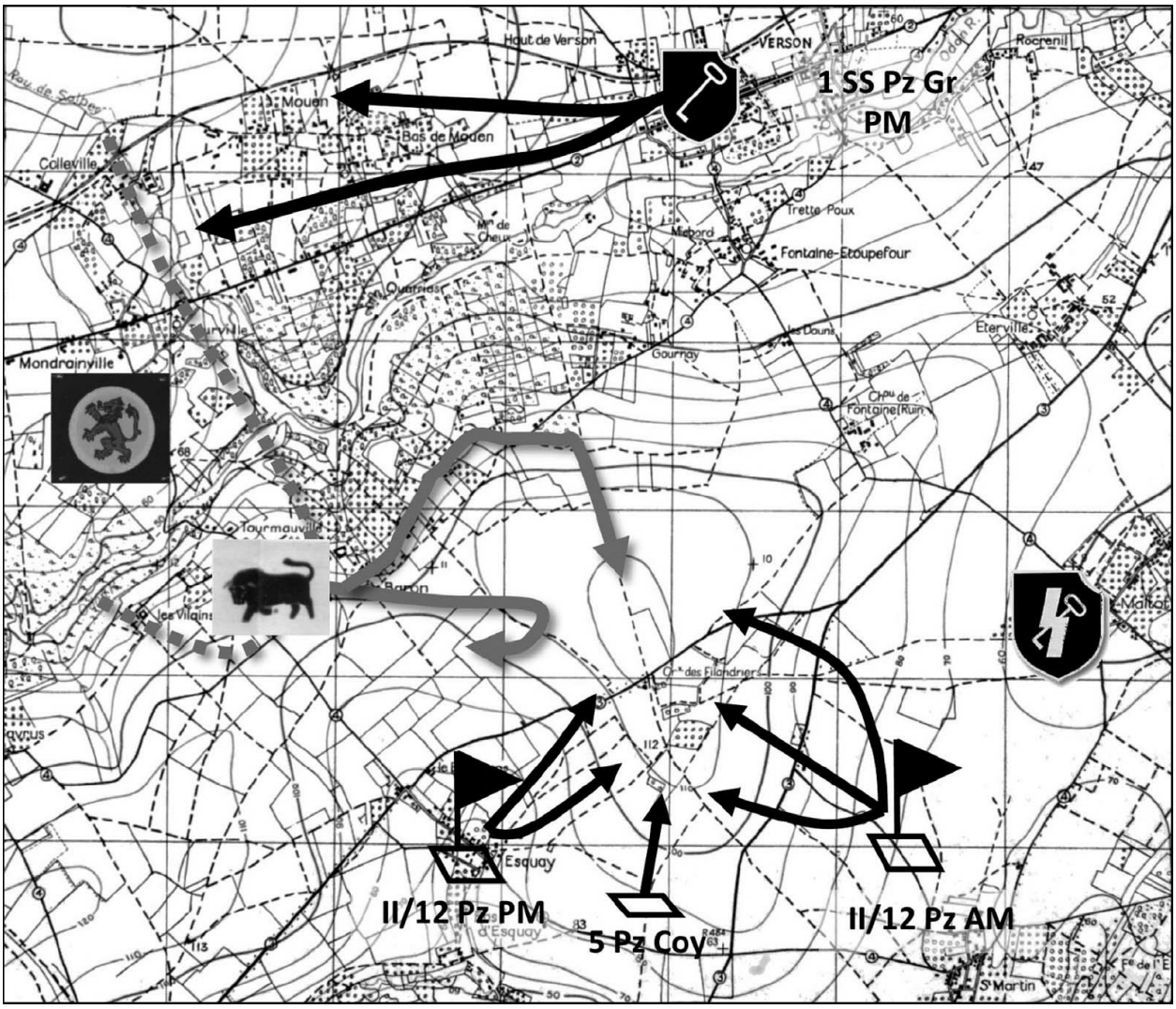
The plan to cut the Corridor.

A German general standing on the crest of Hill 112 had been heard to say, ‘He who holds Hill 112, holds Normandy.’ Though looking at it from a distance it is not an impressive feature, once on top, the views over the country in every direction are dominating, fully justifying its reputation as the ‘cornerstone’ of victory. Naturally all thoughts of counter-attacking the Odon bridgehead were swept away by the urgency of recapturing Hill 112, which was crowned by a small wood and two orchards.

At 0930 hours, *Sturmbannführer* Prinz’s II Battalion attacked with three of his by now under-strength panzer companies and a similarly weakened

company of Panthers, but they had very little infantry support. The slope up to the plateau gave a covered approach, but once on the open top the fighting was intense and the *Hitlerjugend* were driven back by a combination of anti-tank, heavy artillery and mortar fire. Around midday, the four surviving Panzer IVs of the 5th Company attempted a more circumspect attack on the Small Wood, but again fell back under a deluge of fire from the other rim of the plateau, having lost another panzer. Possession of Hill 112 was, however, too important to abandon to the enemy and a third attack was mounted at 1700 hours.

The *Hitlerjugend*'s view down towards Baron and the Tourmauville bridge.



The loss of Hill 112 and the counter-attacks, 28 June.

During the afternoon the 5th Panzer Company received six repaired panzers from the Workshop Company now with nine operational Panzer IVs, they joined the attack which fielded some thirty AFVs. This time II Battalion advanced from the west using the concave slope for cover, but once out on the plateau the result was the same, the only success being securing a toehold in the Small Wood. British tanks attempting to maintain hull-down positions on the northern rim of the feature were able to dominate the plateau and combined with the vast artillery resources and seemingly endless ammunition available to them, pressing home the attack was untenable for Prinz. In short, any attempt by the armour of either side to advance across the open crest lines of Hill 112 was met with heavy fire; it was too open for the tanks of

either side to survive for long. The 8th Rifle Brigade, however, was able to secure positions on the crest of Hill 112 in the Large Orchard.

Overnight there was much activity on Hill 112: the British reinforced, while the Germans counter-attacked and drove the British out of the Orchard. Prinz's men recovered as many of their knocked-out panzers as possible for repair or that other well-known armoured activity, cannibalization for spare parts. One of the recovered Panzer IVs had been found intact with its engine running, but all its crew were dead. British war diaries record an attack being launched by six Tigers around midnight, but once again these were probably just patrolling Panzer IVs.

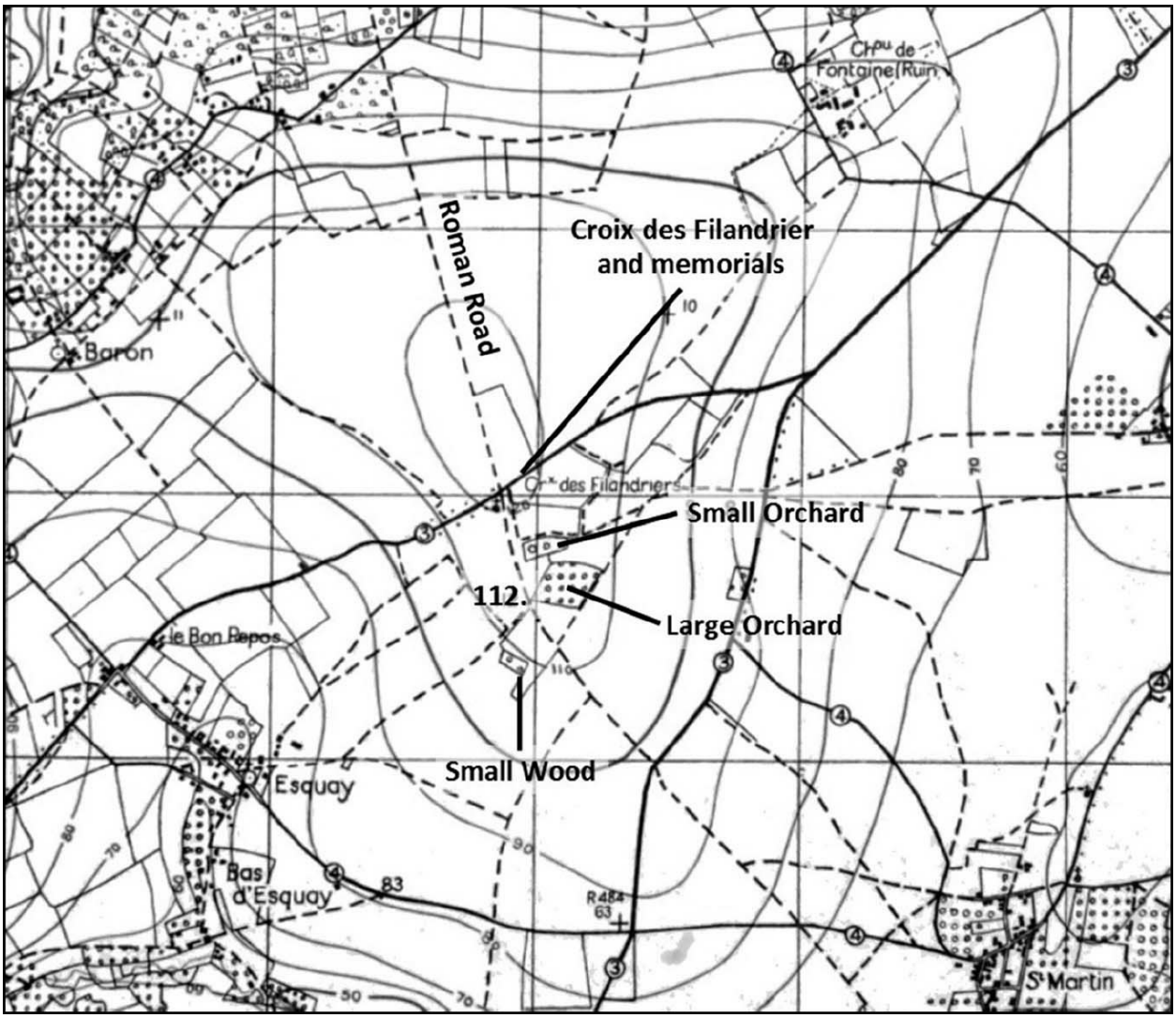
The German view from the Large Orchard of the problem at Hill 112: the open fire-swept plateau.

Back in the Odon Valley, once the Argyles had been relieved the battalion headed a mile west to secure the Gavrus bridge. Once again, a paucity of infantry and/or liaison with the *Kampfgruppen* assembling to the west had allowed a second significant crossing to fall into enemy hands, limiting German counterattack options on the western flank.

Meanwhile, north of the Odon the British sought to expand the width of their narrow corridor to the Tourmauville bridge, while the Germans needed

to cut that same corridor and destroy the enemy bridgehead. For the *Hitlerjugend*, with improved weather, attacking over the open ground towards St Manvieu and Cheux from the east would be inviting destruction by Allied fighter-bombers and artillery. The belt of thicker country between the Odon and the railway west of Verson, however, offered altogether better prospects of being able to advance and cut the Corridor at the 'bottleneck' around Colleville.

To the west, with the relief overnight of Wünsche's panzers and the remains of the 26th SS *Panzergrenadiers* and their inadequate replacement by other formations, the enemy, however, were successful in gaining 'elbow room' by securing Grainville and Le Valtru on the Caen-Villers Bocage road. To the east, however, the 15th Scottish were unsuccessful, and the threat posed here by German attacks against the Corridor contributed to VIII Corps' reluctance to exploit the ground beyond Hill 112 to the Orne bridges. Here the attack from the area of Verson had been delivered by a *Kampfgruppe* based on the 1st SS *Panzergrenadiers*, supported by elements of the 21st Panzer Division and Tigers. The orders that *Sturmbannführer* Frey received at the *Hitlerjugend*'s headquarters at Louvigny were simple:



Hill 112.

The Regiment is to move out at noon. It is to follow the road from Caen to Villers Bocage, moving on both sides of it. The I Battalion [under Lotter] is to move on the right, the II [under Max Hansen] on the left.

Attack objective: Mouen.

Overall objective: To make a thrust into the flank of the enemy forces attacking on both sides of Tourville in order to cut off any enemy elements which have crossed the Odon.

Frey was, however, not happy; it was all too rushed. He later wrote:

I received the attack order from *Standartenführer* Kurt Meyer. I immediately made him aware that I could not execute the order without

the support of the heavy weapons. I therefore requested a delay until the LAH's artillery could arrive.[21] He answered my objection by saying that the artillery of the 12th SS Panzer Division would support my attack. I started the attack at the designated time, but it was with a heavy heart that I gave the order because, as I feared, there was no artillery observation officer with me, and the 12th SS Panzer Division's artillery did not take any action of its own accord.

Sturmbannführer Albert Frey, commanding officer of the 1st SS *Panzergrenadier* Regiment.

The shield of the *Hitlerjugend*'s sister division, the *Leibstandarte* Adolf Hitler. Having been greatly reduced in strength in Russia, the division had been rebuilt again and fed into battle as they and fuel arrived.

The *Leibstandarte* moving in daylight had yet to fully learn the art of avoiding air OP aircraft. They were spotted and for the first time felt the crushing weight of Allied artillery as they assembled. Frey commented that 'The enemy offered immediate and heavy resistance. A remarkable feature of the resistance was the machine-gun fire. It was very heavy and fell with equal intensity along the entire attack sector. It appeared that they were firing it from their tanks!'[22]

There were in fact relatively few patrols from the recce regiments and infantry belonging to the 11th Armoured Division deployed to confront the initial advance through the thick country, but the further west the 1st LAH *Panzer-grenadiers* progressed, the more numerous and stiffer was the

resistance. A company of the 3rd Monmouthshires was among those overwhelmed in Mouen, but by the time II Battalion, LAH reached the enemy's defences on the line of the Salbey stream just east of Colleville, they had become overextended and were brought to a halt. Weidinger too had got close from the west but the pincer attacks on Colleville and the Corridor had failed.

Operation EPSOM: 29 June 1944

With the arrival of II SS Panzer Corps, which was to mount a major attack astride the Odon to eliminate the Allied breakthrough, the by now thin remnants of III Battalion, 26th SS *Panzergrenadiers*, the 12th SS Panzer Regiment and the Recce Battalion were relegated to a subsidiary role in support of the 10th *Frundsberg* SS Panzer Division. The *Frundsberg*s' attack to destroy British troops south of the Odon was due to start at 0630 hours, but as a result of enemy action and delays in the rushed assembly, it was delayed until 1430 hours. In the meantime, the 11th Armoured Division was attempting to consolidate its hold on Hill 112. To this end, the 8th Rifle Brigade had recaptured the orchard and had driven off a handful of panzers to secure the Small Wood on the far side of the broad hilltop.

North of the Odon the 1st SS *Panzergrenadiers* were driven back from the salient they had created the previous day, between the railway and the river, by an attack on Mouen. After some close-quarter fighting, they withdrew to new defensive positions in the area of Verson and Fontaine-Étoupefour.

While still holding the front around the north-west of Caen with 25th *Panzer-grenadiers*, the action of the *Hitlerjugend* in the area of Hill 112 was confined to defensive fighting around its south-east quadrant, supported by a *Nebelwerfer* battalion. *Oberscharführer* Kretzschmar of the 5th Panzer Company recalled the day and its highlight: fratricide!

> … we were in a defensive position at the base of Hill 112 and artillery fire was raining down on us, but around mid-day eight to ten fighter-bombers arrived and circled over the hill. They then attacked the Large Orchard with bombs, rockets and machine guns, while we sat in our hatches, marvelling at the spectacle. '… it's better they blast their own

troops than us!’ grunted my gunner.

Flak Panzers

By this stage of the war Allied air supremacy led to the Germans fielding a far greater number of anti-aircraft weapon systems. The lightest were the well-tried 20mm Flak 38, the 37mm Flak 37 and the heavy weapon was the famous 88mm Flak gun. Of these, the 20mm guns were, in the 12th SS Panzer Regiment, mounted on fully-tracked armoured chassis by the time of the invasion.

Flak Panzer 38(t).

The first anti-aircraft system to be received in the division’s panzer regiment was mounted on the Czech 38(t) chassis. A platoon of twelve of these was under regimental headquarters.

The Sd.Kfz.7/1.

The regiment's I Battalion had three quad-barrelled 20mm guns (*Flakvierling*) mounted on armoured Sd.Kfz.7/1 half-tracks. II Battalion, however, originally had three towed 20mm *Flakvierling* and *Untersturmbannführer* Krause, who commanded this anti-aircraft platoon, came up with the idea of using local resources to mount the guns on obsolescent Panzer IV chassis. These were probably the hulls of the panzers that had been 'procured' early on in the formation of the regiment. Later in the campaign the regiment received at least one purpose-built *Flakpanzer* IV with an armoured superstructure for field trials.

The 20mm *Flakvierling* on the hull of an early Mark IV Panzer.

Untersturmbannführer Karl Wilhelm Krause, commander of II Battalion's anti-aircraft platoon.

The division's artillery regiment held four *Flakvierling* mounted on Sd.Kfz.7/1s, which could be deployed from the staff company to each battery.

A well-camouflaged *Flakpanzer* IV *Wirbelwind* in action with the *Hitlerjugend*.

In the divisional headquarters Escort Company and the *Panzergrenadier* Regiment's Flak companies there were single-barrelled towed 20mm Flak 38s. The 14th (Flak) companies each had twelve of these guns.

A 20mm Flak 38 in action against a ground target.

It is worthy of note that it was German practice when closely engaged with the enemy

and the air threat consequently reduced to use Flak guns against ground targets. The most well-known example is the use of the 88mm.

At about the same time, enemy tanks attempted to gain a better hold on Hill 112 by attacking from Baron, but they ran into half a dozen of I Panzer Corps' Tigers, which were under command of the division. They deployed from hides in the village of Esquay onto the flanks of the Shermans and with their 88mm guns quickly brought the enemy's attack to a halt, having inflicted significant casualties, especially among the squadron that turned to confront them.[23]

Elsewhere, II Panzer Corps had brought pressure to bear on VIII Corps and the Corridor but even though they made progress, particularly in the Grainville area, by the end of the day the enemy had counter-attacked and restored their positions. They had been rushed into battle by Berlin a day earlier than they wanted and in daylight. Allied firepower, the weight of which shocked even Eastern Front veterans, was concentrated against them. Nonetheless, with 29th Armoured Brigade on Hill 112 in a dangerous position at the end of a still narrow and vulnerable corridor, orders had been given for the Odon bridgehead to be consolidated and for the tanks of the 11th Armoured Division to withdraw north of the Odon to secure the Corridor. With the abandonment of Hill 112, the attack by II SS Panzer Corps had so far not been entirely fruitless.

Operation EPSOM: 30 June

II SS Panzer Corps' attack to cut the Corridor was resumed under cover of darkness at 0130 hours. The part to be played by the *Hitlerjugend* was to support the *Frundsberg*'s advance from the west by attacking Hill 112 from the east, with II Panzer Battalion and Olböter's III 26th *Panzergrenadiers*. They were heavily supported by *Nebelwerfers* and advanced up the slopes 'against negligible resistance'. The birds had, in fact, flown. The 8th Rifle Brigade had withdrawn with the tanks after dark the previous evening, leaving behind only stragglers among the wreckage of tanks, vehicles and equipment. With the hill once again in their hands, the *Hitlerjugend* searched the abandoned vehicles and defensive positions, finding plenty of 'luxuries'

such as food and clothing.

Even though Hill 112 was back in German hands, the *Frundsberg*'s attempts to attack the Odon bridgehead and the village of Baron were broken up by artillery. The *Hohenstaufen* to the north of the river knocked out, killed or captured many enemy vehicles and men, but again had only transitory success in terms of ground held and cutting the Corridor.

Oberführer Willi Bittrich[24] called off the attacks, so both sides stood on the defensive for the time being. The *Hitlerjugend* had badly delayed the schedule of initial break-in battle and with stragglers inflicting casualties in the rear and a handful of panzers and thinly-spread *panzergrenadiers* held and then contained the British offensive long enough for II SS Panzer Corps to arrive. This success was, however, bought at a terrible cost to the Division in lives with 1,240 men killed, wounded and missing during the six days of MARTLET and EPSOM. Panzer, vehicle and equipment losses had been no less severe.

General Geyr von Schweppenburg, commander of Panzer Group West, reported to Rommel on 30 June that 'Our panzer formations are disintegrating – or have already disintegrated – and soon they will be completely burned out.' Von Rundstedt signalled Berlin at 0330 hours on 1 July: 'I request immediate permission to have a free hand and carry out a planned evacuation of the Caen bridgehead. The evacuation will relieve the irreplaceable formation of I SS Panzer [Corps] from an increasing encirclement [in Caen] and free them for further operations.'

Hitler's answer was transmitted by Lorenz-encoded teleprinter: 'The current positions are to be held. Any future breakthrough by the enemy will be prevented by stubborn resistance or localised counter-attacks.'

An exasperated von Rundstedt rang Berlin and spoke to Hitler's Chief of Staff, Field Marshal Keitel, telling him that 'If you doubt what we are having to do, get here and take over this shambles yourself.' Hitler sacked von Rundstedt and thus the die was cast for the German soldier fighting in Normandy.

A *Hitlerjugend* soldier in Normandy armed with a K98 Mauser rifle.

Allied commanders were not happy either: the resolute defence by the German divisions, the *Hitlerjugend* in particular, was raising the spectre of a situation akin to the trench-lock of the First World War.

Chapter Six

The Battle for Caen

> ‘I am filled with rage when I think of my brave grenadiers who have been fighting day and night for four weeks and who are now to be senselessly sacrificed.’ [Field Marshal Erwin Rommel]

With the decision to end II SS Panzer Corps’ counteroffensive, there was a short period of relative quiet as both sides expected the other to renew the fighting between the Odon and the Orne. For the *Hitlerjugend* there was time to develop their defences around the Carpiquet airfield and village, consequent on the loss of Marcelet, and to consolidate their positions in Éterville and to its east. The defence of Hill 112, which remained the focus of the fighting, was handed over to the *Frundsberg*.

Even though the frontage held by the *Hitlerjugend* was reduced and three other ordinary infantry divisions were arriving, it would be some time before the *HJ* could be relieved from the positions around Caen. The fictitious threat posed by the FUSAG was still keeping German formations fixed in the Pas-de-Calais and Allied air interdiction reaching deep into France was delaying marching troops and logistics heading for Normandy.

With the left flank now joining the 25th *Panzergrenadiers* in holding Caen, the division was deployed in an arc from Éterville, north across the Odon to Carpiquet and around the north-west of the city, via Authie and Buron. The key to holding the defences of Caen was the high ground immediately north of Carpiquet village, which would certainly soon receive the attention of the Allies. To improve positions astride the Odon, a battalion of the 1st SS *Panzergrenadiers*, which had remained under command of the *Hitlerjugend*, carried out a limited attack to recapture Verson and Fontaine-

Étoupefour on 1 July.

On 3 July Field Marshal von Rundstedt was relieved of his command, with General von Kluge taking over as C-in-C West, reinforcing in his first order Hitler's message to stand and fight. Also dismissed was General Geyr von Schweppenburg, who was replaced in command of Panzer Group West by General Eberbach. Nonetheless, Rommel, denied the option of pulling back out of range of naval gunfire, still hoped to be able to withdraw from Caen when the time came, 'without being fleeced too much'.

The Loss of Carpiquet: Operation WINDSOR

The attack on Carpiquet by the 3rd Canadian Division had originally been a subsequent phase of the EPSOM plan but now Operation WINDSOR was expanded and was to be executed on 4 July by the 8th Canadian Brigade. The brigade was reinforced by an additional infantry battalion, tanks of an armoured regiment and assault armour from the 79th Armoured Division, plus the usual prodigious amount of artillery fire support from twenty-one Gunner regiments. The firepower included the nine 16in guns of the battleship HMS *Rodney*, which engaged the airfield buildings and village at a range of around 26,000 yards. Designed to soften up the defences, during 3 July she fired fifteen broadsides, which sent 135 shells each weighing 2,375lb ploughing into the *Hitlerjugend*'s defences around the airfield. The *panzergrenadiers* were able to use the preinvasion concrete bunkers of the airfield defences for shelter from this and the subsequent artillery bombardment.

I/26th SS *Panzergrenadiers*, or what was left of them – four very under-strength companies totalling about 200 men – held the village and the hangars to north and south of the airfield. The airfield itself, being open, was not held but dominated by fire from the five Panzer IVs of the 9th Company dug in in the area of the barracks. Further back were the 88mm guns of the divisional anti-aircraft battalion which could cover the eastern end of the airfield but also the eastern exits of Carpiquet village. The 150mm guns of III/12 SS Artillery Regiment[1] and elements of 83 *Werfer* Regiment were in support. This was indeed a slim force to hold a large and tactically important piece of ground.

One of the bunkers at Carpiquet airfield being used by the Canadians after the attack.

A surviving example of the Carpiquet bunkers. This one is on the northern side of the airfield alongside the modern terminal building.

The headquarters of I Battalion 26th *Panzergrenadiers* was located in one of the concrete bunkers near the southern hangars from where they had a restricted view west towards Marcelet. *Sturmbannführer* Krause was alerted to the imminence of the attack by his men who noted increasing enemy activity during 2/3 July. Once again, the radio intelligence section at the headquarters of the *Hitlerjugend,* now located in eastern Caen, intercepted a growing volume of Canadian radio chatter during the night of 3/4 July. Patrols also brought back information and, finally, a member of the division who had been lying low in enemy territory since the first day of EPSOM took the opportunity provided by Allied movement to assembly areas to exfiltrate to safety. He brought with him the location of enemy assembly areas, which were promptly shelled. The Radio Intelligence Section's intercepts indicated that this fire was effective and, but for a lack of ammunition, the fire strike could have been even more successful. Artilleryman Herman Bull recalled:

> We opened fire and after days of being rationed to a handful of rounds a day and only few shells per gun arriving to replace them, I was surprised at how much of our pile we fired but when it was over, I saw the

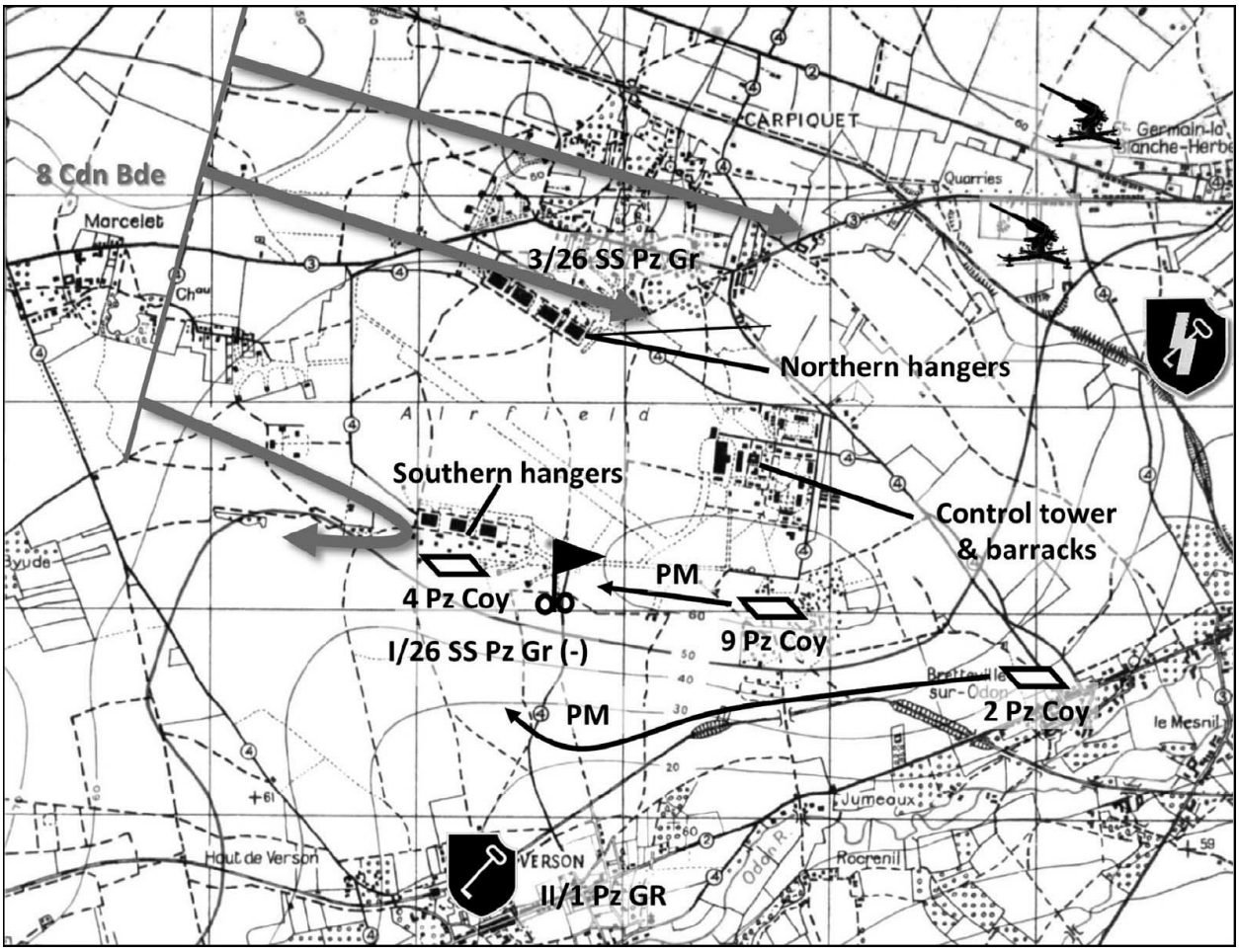
> *Scharführer* counting the remaining shells and shaking his head. We were worried because our pitiful pile of shells was nothing like we supposed the Tommies had ready near their guns.

The divisional commander Kurt Meyer outlined the plan to defend the village, though possibly with a degree of hindsight:

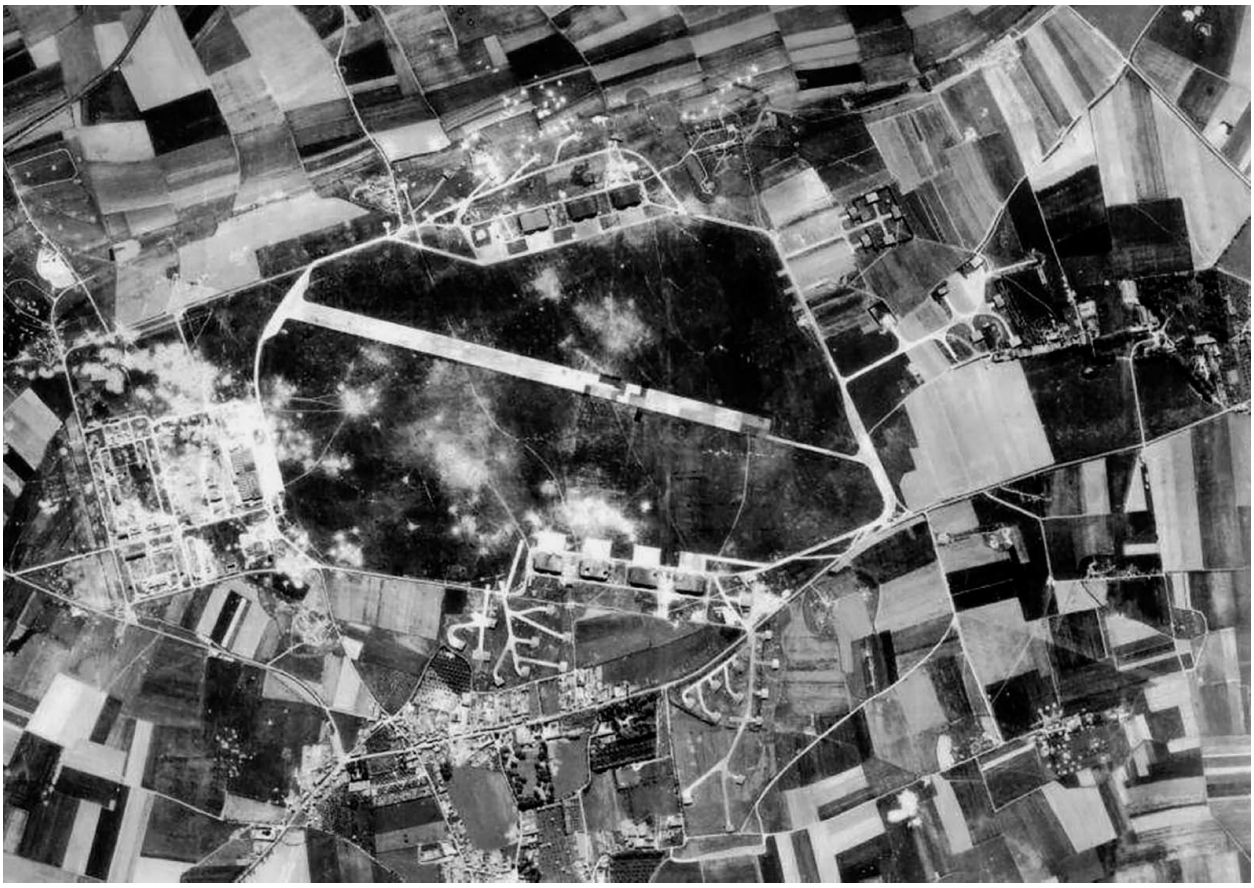
> The defenders of Carpiquet no longer had any anti-tank weapons, as they had been destroyed several days earlier. There were, however, minefields to the front of the village. The *panzergrenadiers* were to tempt the enemy into the village and conduct a fighting withdrawal to the eastern edge where the 88mm guns were in ambush positions.

The attack began with heavy enemy artillery fire on known *HJ* locations and battery positions at around 0500 hours, while three Canadian infantry battalions advanced behind a tremendous creeping barrage. With the enemy out in the open, the *Hitlerjugend*'s artillery fired at targets several hundred yards behind the barrage but, as Herman Bull feared, there simply wasn't enough ammunition to reply effectively.

The main weight of the Canadian attack by two battalions fell on the 3rd Company in the village and a platoon of the 1st Company in the northern hangars. Crouching in their trenches and shelters they had endured the barrage as it passed over them. *Sturmmann* Wambach recalled that he was responsible for calling for artillery fire with flares, as the radios failed and telephone lines were invariably cut by the barrage:



The Canadian attack on Carpiquet, 4 July 1944.


Carpiquet airfield before the attack, having at this stage ‘only been lightly shelled’.

> As the enemy shellfire moved on, the leading tanks rolled towards us. I fired a green flare for our artillery, but I was seen by an enemy tank, which drove up and did a neutral turn over my trench in an attempt to crush me. I was partly buried and surrounded by enemy tanks, some of which were burning. Then the infantry came and shouted, ‘Hands up, SS bastard.’ They pulled me out of the earth and tied me up and hit me in the face and body with their rifle butts. I was tied to a post in the open where German shells were landing and left there for hours before I was taken to the rear.

The 3rd Company and the platoon in the hangars were overwhelmed by numbers and driven back, but fighting through the village was a slow and costly business for the Canadians who again reported determined resistance by ‘the loathsome SS’. The ‘Funnies’ from the 79th Armoured Division blasted their way into buildings with their ‘flying dustbin’ petard mortar

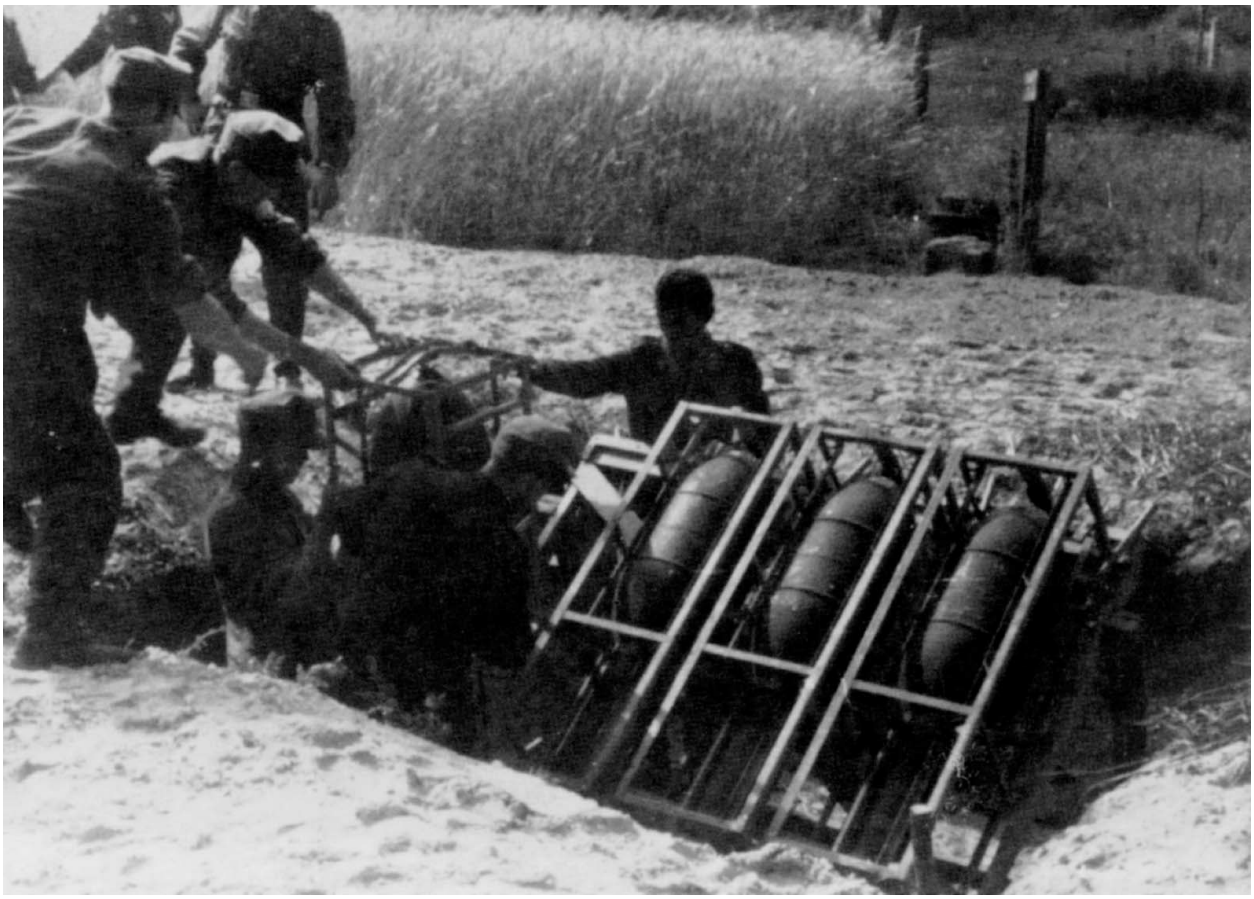
demolition rounds and flamed points of resistance. An added difficulty for the Canadians as they tried to clear the village were the 28cm or 32cm *Wurfkörper Spreng* (explosive missile) rockets which the commander of the attached *Nebelwerfer* Regiment had found dumped and taken into use.[2]

It wasn't until 1400 hours that the Canadians reported Carpiquet secure and only twenty *panzergrenadiers* escaped from the village. The fire from the 88mm guns to the east of the village had, however, already prevented Canadian exploitation to their next objective, the control tower and barracks.

It was a different story around the southern hangars held by *Sturmbannführer* Krause: here a single Canadian battalion attacked three *HJ* companies, giving a wholly different force ratio. Even though the barrage was 'crushing', *Oberscharführer* Wohlgemuth reported:

> I sheltered in one of the bunkers, but the shelling was so heavy that pieces of concrete were dropping off the roof. When it stopped, I went out to repel the enemy; two of our mortarmen were dead and our artillery observation officer had a large shell splinter stuck in his back. The enemy infantry attacked in groups and we fired away but we only stopped them when they reached the first hangar.

This, however, was not until the enemy had overrun the forward companies. I Battalion, 12 SS Panzer Regiment, which at this time commanded a mix of Panzer IV and Panther companies, had deployed the 4th Company from its hides in the suburbs of Caen to support Krause's battalion. The Panthers and the five dug-in Panzer IVs of the 9th fired from their ambush positions throughout the morning, throwing back the Canadian tanks and British assault armour. As the Canadian infantry advanced through exploding mortar bombs to within 150 yards of the *HJ*'s forward defences, the machine guns opened fire. After bitter fighting around the trenches the enemy, who had lost a significant number of tanks, were forced back and withdrew some 800 yards to the cover of a small wood. However, the relief was short-lived as the enemy artillery resumed its fire.



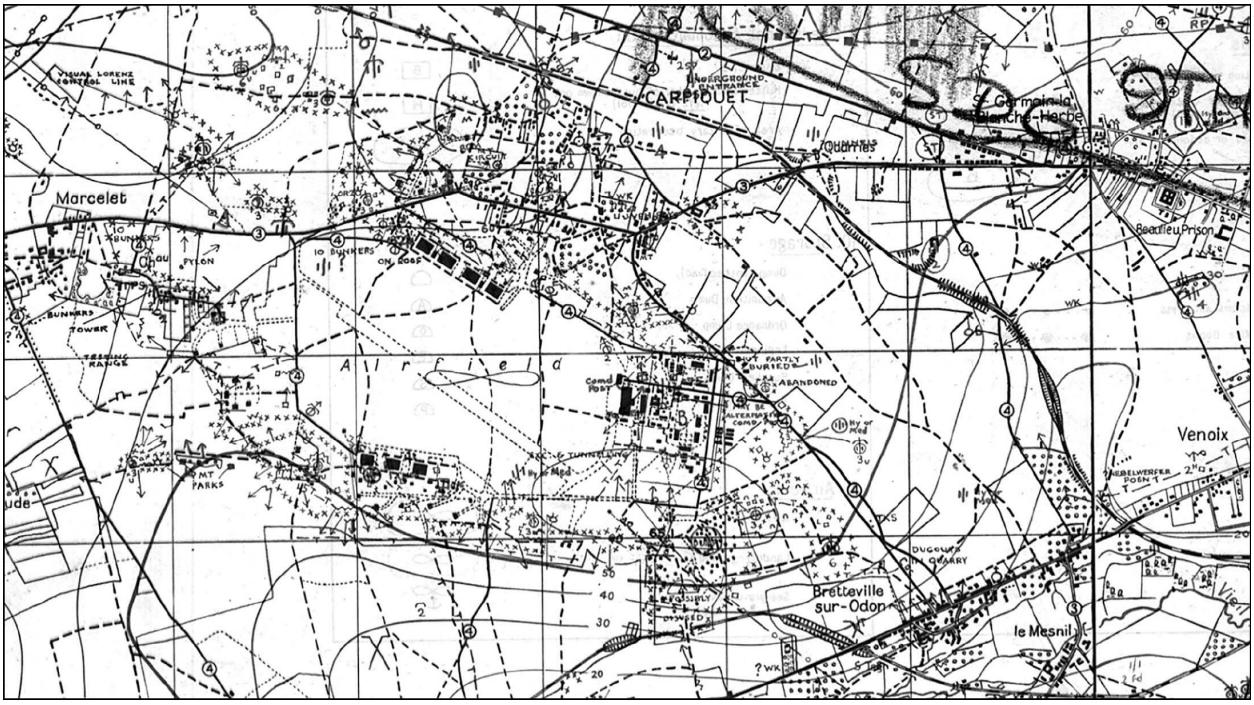
German soldiers digging in *Wurfkörper Spreng* in preparation for firing.

Hitlerjugend soldiers captured in Carpiquet village.

At 1600 the Canadians renewed their attack on the southern hangars but, with the support of tanks and flame-throwers, this time penetrated I Battalion's defences. *Sturmbannführer* Krause ordered the survivors of the forward companies to pull back to the headquarters location and personally led a counterattack to help the withdrawal. On this occasion the Panthers of the 4th Company were joined by the panzers of the 9th Company in an attack that forced the enemy back again with losses. The 2nd Panzer Company

closed up and provided fire support from the south.

During the course of the evening, the southern hangars and barrack area were attacked by forty-four fighter-bombers; their targets were the seventeen panzers reported as ‘dominating the airfield’. The Canadians, however, abandoned their attempt to capture the southern hangars and withdrew to their original positions.



An extract from an Allied tactical overprint of the 1:25,000 map covering Carpiquet dating from before EPSOM.

The hangars at Carpiquet airfield, shredded by shellfire.

The loss of the northern part of the airfield and Carpiquet village was regarded as a serious compromise of the defence of Caen and its bridges over the Orne. Consequently, army headquarters ordered the *Hitlerjugend* to recapture the area that night. The task was passed to the 1st SS *Panzergrenadier* Regiment, which had now been joined by most of its III Battalion and support companies.

II Battalion, 1st *Panzergrenadiers* occupied the barrack area, from which they were able to bring fire down on the ruins of the village, while I and III battalions, using the cover of darkness to avoid air attack and observation, as well as to cross the open ground, were to attack south from the Caen-Bayeux Road (N13).

The attack got under way before dawn and the 400-yard advance to the railway line was completed without incident, as Grenadier Reiff of the 2nd Company recalled: ‘The going was quiet as far as the railway embankment, where the level crossing keeper’s house stood. As soon as we crossed the

embankment, however, all hell broke loose.'

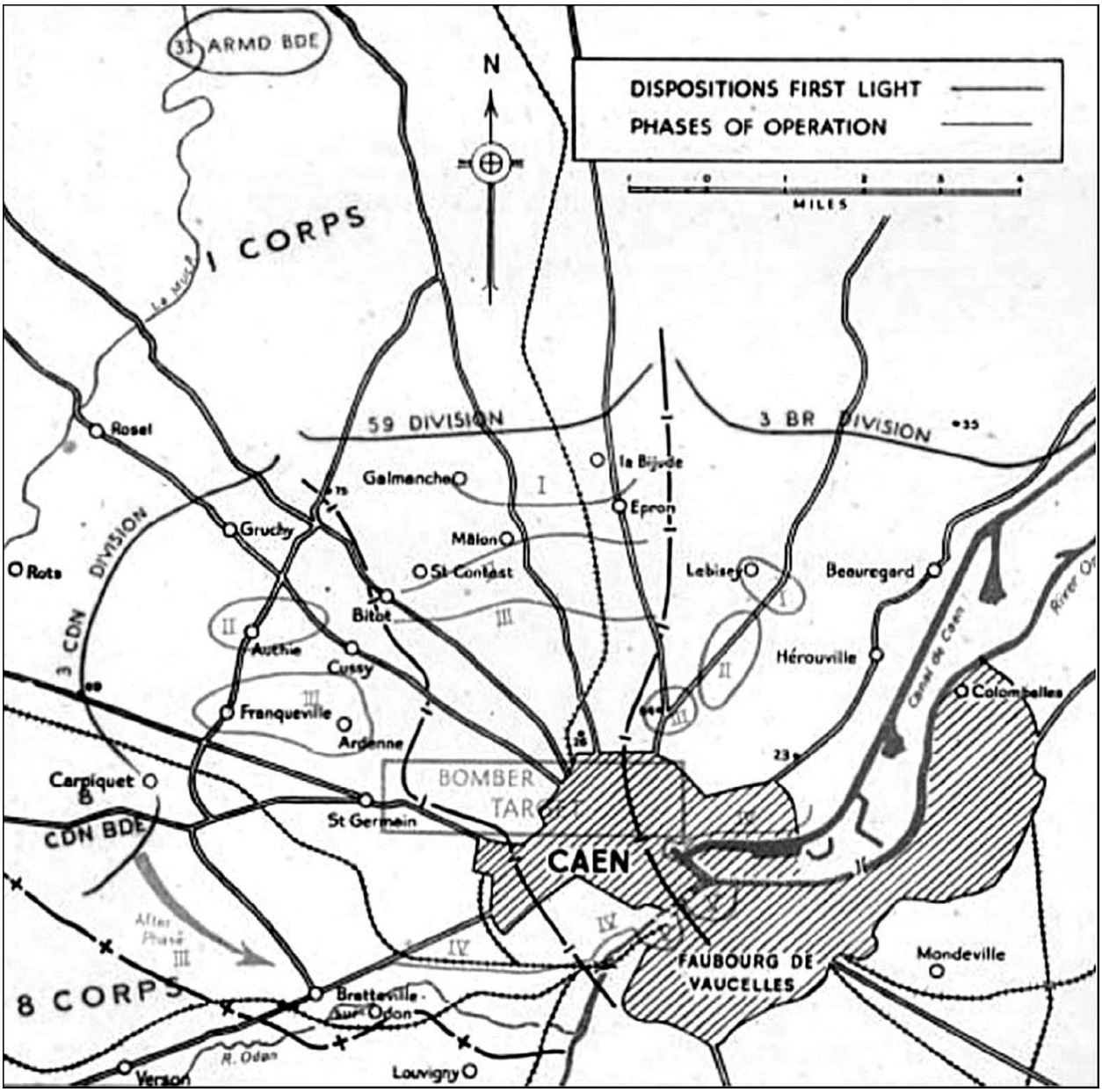
The Canadians were waiting for them and the *panzergrenadiers*, who, despite the heavy enemy fire attempted to move on towards the village but few made it, were driven back by tanks and machine guns. To make matters worse, III Battalion became the victims of friendly artillery fire. The attackers rushed into the limited cover of the railway line, where they were pinned down by artillery fire. I Battalion suffered seventy-six casualties and twenty-one soldiers were missing. Carpiquet village remained securely in Canadian hands.

The Loss of Caen: Operation CHARNWOOD

With the US army's advance south through the hedgerow country towards La Haye-du-Puits under way, at the operational level a distraction on the eastern flank was needed to fix German troops, particularly the panzer divisions, away from General Bradley's operations. The capture of Caen would achieve this by reinforcing the threat of break-out towards Falaise, as well as delivering much-needed ground to the Second Army. While the preliminary operations to capture Carpiquet were under way, the British I Corps was planning the assault on Caen by three divisions, each supported by a tank or an armoured brigade.

Facing the Allies were just two German divisions. Of the now greatly weakened *Hitlerjugend*, the 25th SS *Panzergrenadiers* stood in the path of the 3rd Canadian Division and a brigade of the 59th (Staffordshire) Division. To the *HJ*'s right was the newly-arrived 16th Luftwaffe Field Division, which had finally relieved elements of the 21st Panzer Division. They were to be attacked by another brigade of the 59th and the British 3rd Division.

The 1st SS *Panzergrenadier* Regiment, still under command of the *Hitlerjugend*, held the front from Éterville via the Carpiquet barracks, north to Franceville. From there for 5 miles around the north-west of Caen the 25th *Panzergrenadiers* held their by now well-developed defensive positions. These defences extended as far east as the railway line that ran north from Caen and, with mines and anti-tank ditches, were over 2 miles deep.



The Allied CHARNWOOD plan.

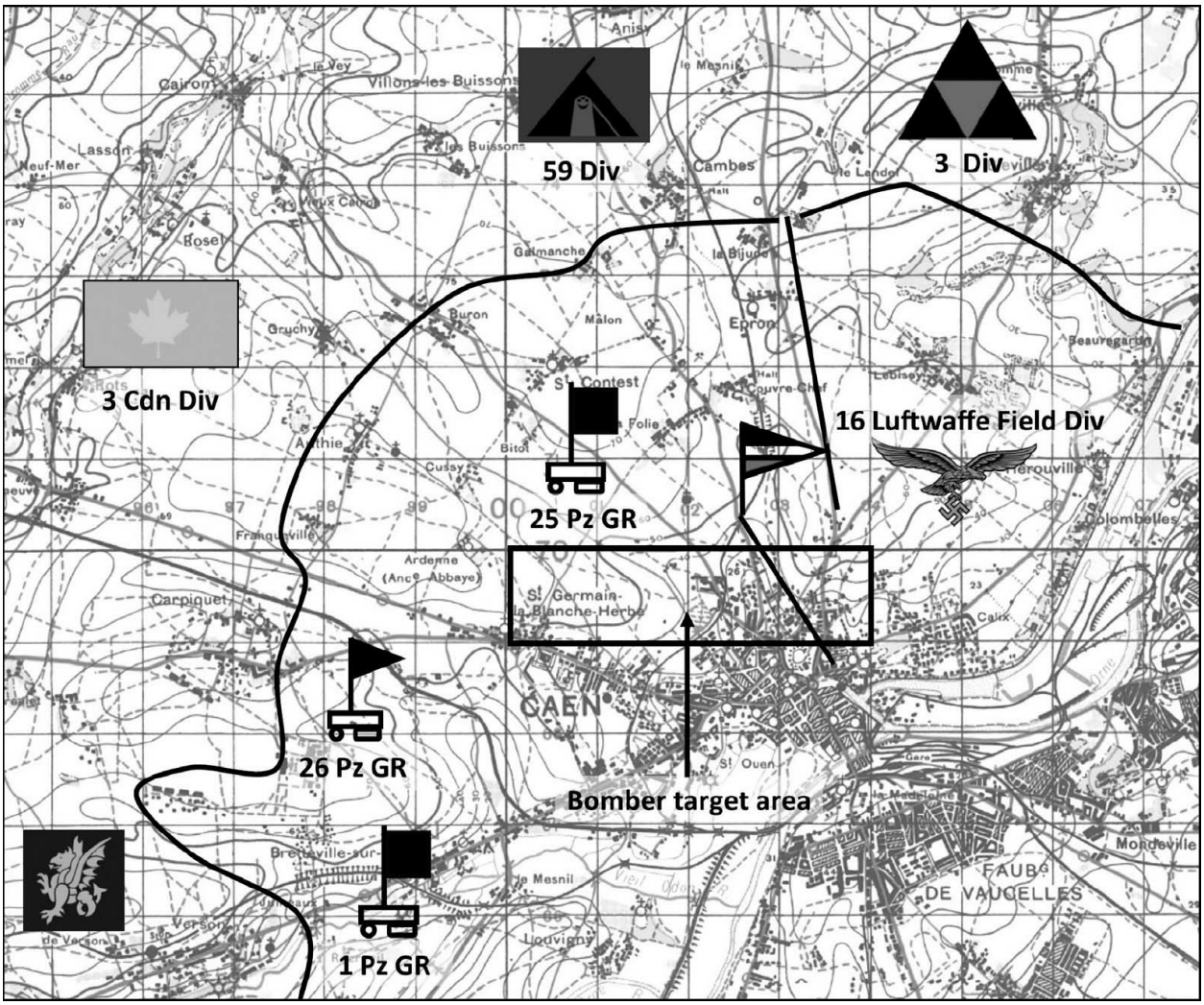
During this period, the 12th SS Panzer Regiment received a welcome boost to its strength with the arrival of thirteen Panthers. These tanks were not replacements, but were issued to bring I Battalion up to strength, which had been much delayed in their journey from the factories in Germany. Most of these fully-crewed Panthers were used to reconstitute *Obersturmführer* Ribbentrop's 3rd Panzer Company.[3]

General Eisenhower remained increasingly concerned about the 21st Army Group's lack of progress in terms of territory and again promised the full

support of Allied bombers. After a couple of quiet days, this time the weather would not preclude flying and the attack on Caen was to be preceded by a heavy bomber raid on the northern suburbs of the city.[4]

As dusk fell on 7 July, 457 aircraft of RAF Bomber Command dropped a total of 2,363 tons of bombs on the northern part of Caen. The destruction wrought on the central part of the city was partly due to the pathfinders dropping their markers cautiously too far south, but also to shelling during the two months that Caen was just behind the front line.[5,6] Following the heavy bombers came medium bombers and rocket-firing Typhoons. Meanwhile, the Allied artillery including naval gunfire had been targeting the villages held by the division.

The effect of this aerial firepower has been hotly debated. With the majority of the bombs falling on the centre of the city rather than the northern extremity as intended, this meant that there were few casualties in the division. Two tanks were hit and another two turned over, while further back in reserve, III Battalion, 26th *Panzergrenadiers* suffered only seven casualties, but the Divisional Escort Company was more seriously hit. Otherwise only a handful of logistic units passing through the city were caught. Observers, however, state that after the bombing they saw no evidence of German personnel or vehicle casualties in the city. *Standartenführer* Kurt Meyer, whose headquarters was located in a ‘barracks’ inside the medieval castle just north of the city centre, summed up the impact on the division: ‘The front line was so sparsely manned that a bomber attack couldn’t cause much damage. Two thousand, five hundred tons of bombs had merely succeeded in overturning a few SPW [half-tracks].’



The situation pm on 7 July and the intended bomber target area.

Panzergrenadiers watch the bombing of Caen from the Abbey d'Ardenne.

The French population was not so lucky: even though the majority of them had left the city, it is estimated that between 300 and 400 French civilians were killed.

Across the division, in the aftermath of the bombing, there was naturally a nervous expectation of an attack. Kurt Meyer wrote:

> The air-raid must have been the prelude to the main enemy assault. Every man was ready, the artillery waited for orders to put a curtain of fire in front of our positions, but we waited. The phones were silent, and we all stared out into the night waiting for the enemy attack. Minutes passed, it was incomprehensible; the Allies had not exploited the tremendous bombing.
>
> We were all expecting a big attack and prepared for the inevitable, as we had no illusions as to our hopeless situation. While I anxiously waited for dawn, Hubert Meyer had fallen asleep with his head on the map table. He was an excellent chief of staff.

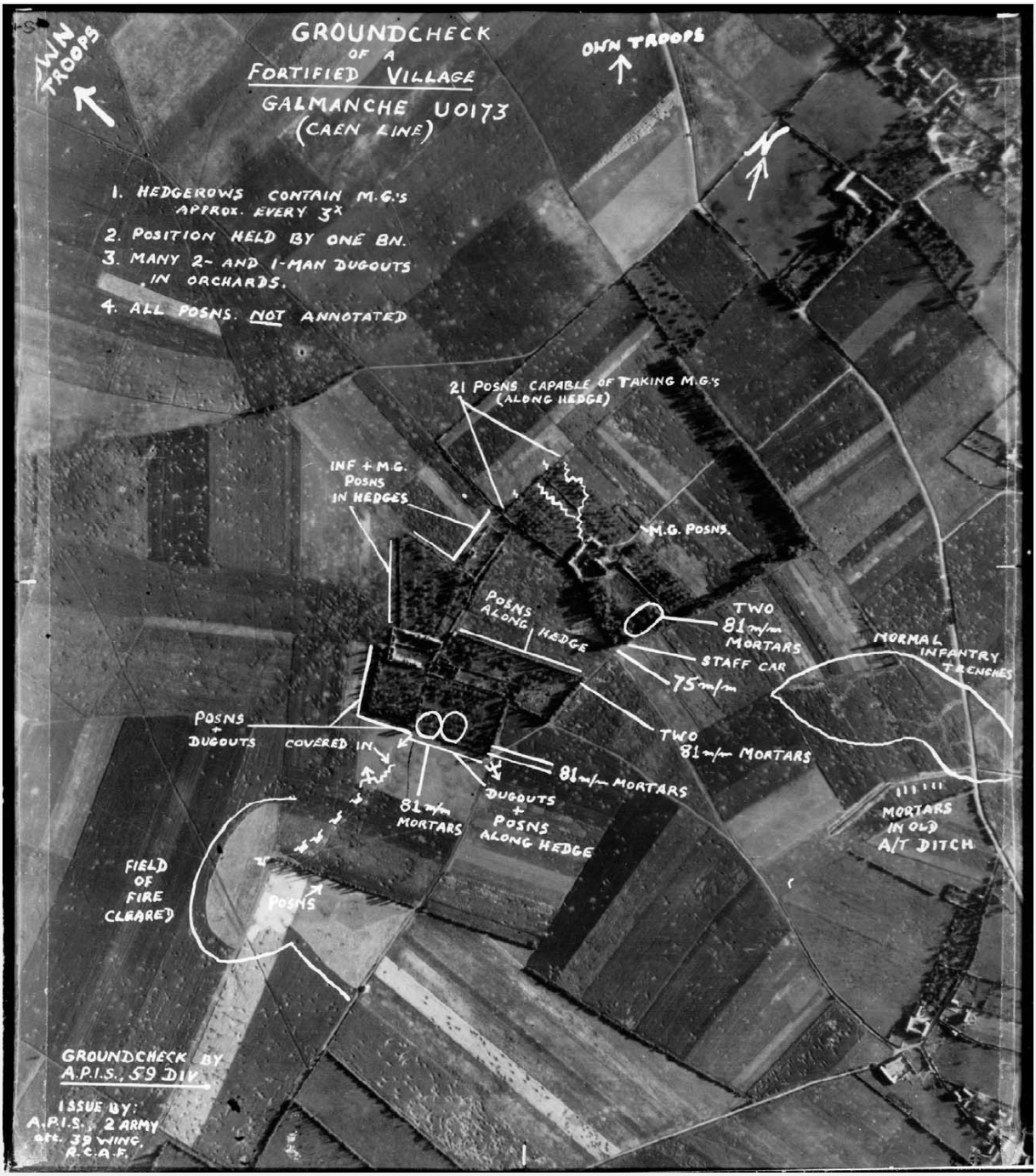
Attack by the 59th (Staffordshire) Division: 8 July 1944

At 0420 hours the routine explosion of shells was finally broken by ‘Artillery fire of unimaginable intensity’. Kurt Meyer described how shells

> … from both the land and the sea fell on our front line. The divisional headquarters cellar shook and plaster and dust fell on the candlelit map table. Our artillery and mortar batteries laid down final protective fires. We had been procuring ammunition for days and were trying to give it to our heavily engaged infantry. Fighter-bombers were diving down on our artillery batteries and attacking every vehicle they could see. The Orne bridges were continuously under fire.

Air Photographic Interpretation

The Allied Air Forces claim that 80 per cent of tactical intelligence was gained by air recce, the main source of which was air photography.* The photograph was taken by aircraft of the 39th (Reconnaissance) Wing, Royal Canadian Air Force and ‘ground-checked’ and marked by the 59th Division’s Air Photographic Interpretation Section (APIS). It demonstrates the capability of the 59th Division and Second Army APIS to quickly analyse and reproduce the photo, taken on 5 July, and then distribute it in time for it to be available to battalion intelligence cells for orders during 7 July.



A ground-check air photograph of Galmanche used by the 59th Division in preparation for Operation CHARNWOOD.

The photo shows the positions of II Battalion (-), 25th SS *Panzergrenadiers* around the farming hamlet of Galmanche to the north of Caen. The village is in the centre of the photograph and the outskirts of Cambes are to the top right-hand corner.

In general, the photo shows plenty of evidence of shelling but virtually no panzer tracks in the crops. With the aid of ground information from patrols and observation,

German fire trenches have been identified in hedgerows. Where the ground allows, an area of trenches on a reverse slope has been identified from the photograph, along with cleared fields of fire. Also marked are communication trenches forward from the farm buildings to the trenches in the hedgerow. The limitation is clearly the ground cover provided by the trees of the orchard.

Extract 1:25,000 Ouistreham.

Of particular interest is the number of mortar positions identified: six 81mm mortars are deployed in three sections of two supporting their own rifle companies. The battalion's mortars from the Heavy Company are marked in an 'Old A/T (anti-tank) ditch'. This is the ditch used by *Sturmmann* Decker of 10th Company mortars, as a part of the defences described by *Obersturmmführer* Havemeister on page 79 and is marked on the pre-invasion defences overprint map.

What is not shown, off the photograph, are the nine Panzer IVs supporting the battalion dug in to the south of Galmanche.

*Without tactical ground observation and Resistance reports to target such operations, the figure would of course be much lower.

The Allied attack on Caen had begun, ninety minutes before sunrise, with a bombardment by 632 guns, behind which the infantry of the 3rd and 59th divisions advanced. The Canadians would join the advance in the second phase of the attack.

In their first battle, the assault by the 59th Division opened with an attack on the hamlet of La Bijude by a battalion of the 177th Brigade, while Galmanche and its surrounding orchards was similarly attacked by the 176th Brigade. To the east of the railway, the divisional boundary, La Bijude was held by a battalion of the 16th Luftwaffe Field Division, while I Battalion, 25th SS *Panzergrenadiers* held positions in open country west of the railway line. These positions, though somewhat further back, linked up with II Battalion in Galmanche and the Luftwaffe troops in La Bijude.

In Galmanche the commander of the 7th Company, *Obersturmführer* Havemeister, whose soldiers had sheltered in the cellars and deep dugouts among the ruins of the hamlet, recorded the beginning of the enemy attack:

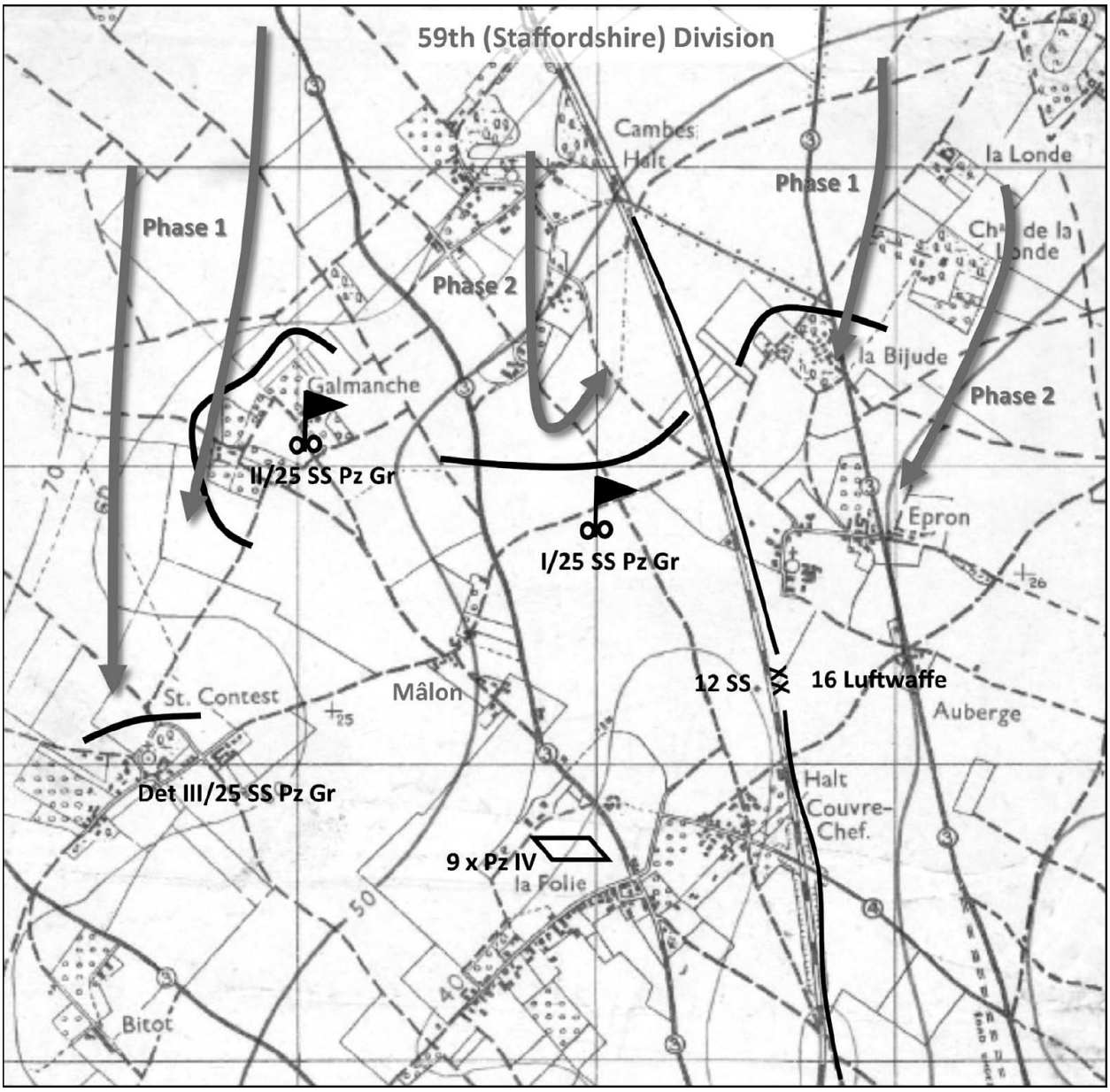
> The detonation of shells suddenly lifted off us and moved on to our rear. We could hear the roar of tanks; the attack was about to start. We crawled out of our shelters and into the trenches and we saw innumerable tanks rolling toward us right across our front. Our anti-tank guns had been knocked out by the artillery fire and the few *Panzerfausts* we had did little to give us confidence.
>
> Lieutenant Kinzig of our attached *Nebelwerfer* battery had established radio operators contact and called for fire on Cambe and like an express train the rockets howled unexpectedly above us and slammed into the

village 1,500 metres away. The strike was supposed to be launched when we were about to be overwhelmed, but it certainly must have helped I Battalion to our right. But the tanks in front of us closed to within 300 metres, and lumps of earth from the exploding shells were flying around us. We could see enemy infantry behind the tanks, but our artillery was still firing at Les Buissons and didn't we swear.

The tanks attacking us were moving at high speed in the direction of the 5th and 6th companies to our left and the enemy infantry was unable to keep up.

The weight of the attack duly fell on the II Battalion's left and Havemeister witnessed what happened to the 5th Company:

The enemy tanks drove over the Company's trenches and bunkers and started to rotate their tracks in an attempt to bury our men. Soon, the enemy infantry arrived and examined our forward positions under fire from us but did not take cover in them. Eventually the infantry followed the tanks and we were not attacked in our rubble fortress. It was now quiet, but we could still hear the noise of fighting further to our left.



The defence against the 59th Division's attack.

During the fighting, *Hauptsturmführer* Thierey, commander of the 6th Company, personally knocked out three Shermans with *Panzerfausts* before he was killed hunting down a fourth enemy tank.

As the Shermans rolled on around Galmanche, mortarman Karl-Heinz Decker of the 8th (Heavy) Company, II/25th *Panzergrenadiers* who had been in position around Galmanche for almost a month saw them coming towards him:

> The Allies began their big push inland during July 1944. We were often active with the mortar, firing at the enemy, but all the while being pushed back due to overwhelming numbers. I remember one particular occasion, in truth I'll never forget it, the mortar was set up, and I was in a hole in a hedge nearby … I'd been there for a while when I began to hear this distant rattling sound. The noise got louder and seemed to be coming closer. A few minutes later an Allied tank rattled past my hole in the hedge. All the hatches on the beast were closed as it went by, and there I was in a hole in the hedge with my pistol in my hand. If I'd had a *Panzerfaust*, I might have been able to disable the thing, but as it was, I could do nothing but watch it go by.
>
> I came out of my hiding place and watched the brute rumble off into the distance. I suddenly realized that my comrades who had previously been nearby were no longer around. Next moment I was being fired at by enemy infantry who were coming along at some distance behind the now almost disappeared tank. As luck would have it there was a cornfield on the other side of the hedge. I dived through the hedge and into the cornfield. I crawled across the field as fast as I could on my belly. The enemy soldiers kept firing across the top of the corn. Every so often they would fire into the field itself when they saw the corn move as I made my way further across the field. Eventually I reached a stone wall at the opposite side of the field. I chose my moment then sprang across the wall. On landing on the other side, I found a couple of equally bewildered German soldiers. I was safe. I considered myself lucky that the enemy did not have any phosphorous ammunition, as the corn was ripe and dry, and it would have burned easily!

To II Battalion's right, I Battalion had been largely spared thanks to the interruption by the *Nebelwerfers*; however, on the other side of the railway line the 16th Luftwaffe Battalion was in trouble in La Bijude and a further advance to Épron would effectively turn the battalion's flank. Kurt Meyer recorded:

> Our neighbour to the right, the 16th Luftwaffe Field Division, was not up to the job. It was shattered by the renewed bombing and this ad hoc

division's will to resist collapsed under the weight of the enemy's firepower. The British 3rd Infantry Division advanced into the Luftwaffe division's defensive positions and soon threatened our division's right flank.

A Hanomag halftrack towing a 75mm Pak 40 anti-tank gun. Note how 'air conscious' the crew are.

However, Meyer continued: 'I/SS-*Panzergrenadier*-Regiment 25 was covering the right flank, and its fire was disrupting the relatively easy advance of the Canadian 3rd [*sic* 59th] Infantry Division into the area of Luftwaffe Field Division, which was almost destroyed.'

Even though I Battalion was holding firm, to prevent a deeper outflanking move, to help contain the enemy and provide support in the centre of the 16th Luftwaffe's area, Meyer deployed a handful of the available panzers and the Divisional Escort Company. Although the surviving *Hitlerjugend* records do not mention it, the 59th Division claims that as they advanced, the enemy reoccupied La Bijude. It is probable that not only did I Battalion provide flanking fire from the railway, but they also infiltrated into the village and

were able to disrupt the enemy's attack on Épron. Fighting was recorded by the British in La Bijude as late as 1330 hours.

At 0700 hours 192 USAAF medium bombers struck in a two-hour attack on likely forming-up places for German counter-attacks, but they were only to bomb if they positively identified their targets. In accordance with their orders, less than half released their load but even so, many bombs were wide of their targets. Among the areas hit were the stout medieval buildings of the castle where the headquarters of the *Hitlerjugend* was located. Kurt Meyer recalled:

> We saw the final wave of bombers heading for us and dropping their bombs. I immediately jumped down into the cellar entrance to our headquarters and ran to the deepest corner. A loud explosion rocked the building and the blast blew the candles out. I could hardly see my hand thanks to the thick clouds of dust, and I could only breathe with difficulty. Hubert Meyer called out to me and more voices could be heard. The blast waves threw a young soldier into the cellar and he cried out: 'We've been buried alive; we've been buried alive' and he was only calmed down with difficulty.
>
> The bombs had hit the garrison church, which was just 50 metres from my headquarters, and had completely destroyed it … Blocks of stone had been thrown around; some fell on our radio vehicles which were parked up under camouflage nets. Our radios were destroyed but we soon overcame this [by resorting to telephone (?)].[7]

As far as the Allies were concerned, with good progress being reported against the 16th Luftwaffe, the British I Corps ordered the next phase of the Allied attack to begin at 0730 hours. *Sturmbannführer* Waldmüller's I Battalion, 25th *Panzer-grenadiers* stood in the way of the 197th Brigade of the 59th Division's advance on Malon. Out in the fields they had survived the heaviest of the Allied bombardment and were able to halt the British infantry and tanks. Kurt Meyer wrote that the battalion 'Stood like a bulwark on the battlefield, unshaken despite the enemy's enormous superiority in men and equipment. They defeated every attack and the Tommies failed to overwhelm the battalion …'

Nonetheless it was a near-run thing and *Sturmbannführer* Prinz was ordered forward with his panzers to assist. A company war diary recorded:

> Because a new breakthrough was reported, the recce platoon of the regiment, with the Flak Platoon of the II Battalion and the command tank, led by the Commander, were detached forward to La Folie. The breakthrough by armoured fighting vehicles reported by the regiment did not prove to be real and the panzers reached Malon without engaging the enemy; there they supported the *panzergrenadiers* [I Battalion] and elements deployed east of La Folie, covering out towards Hill 64 [east of the divisional boundary].

St Georges' Church, the 'garrison church' Meyer referred to in Caen Castle.

Meanwhile, in a lull between shelling of the Orne bridges, General Eberbach reached the *Hitlerjugend*'s headquarters and spoke to Kurt Meyer:

> The general thanked me for the division's success in holding the enemy but he did not at that stage know about the collapse of the Luftwaffe

> Division, which I briefed him on. He immediately understood how serious the situation was and ordered the deployment of panzers from 21st Panzer Division, which were south of the Orne.

The 21st Panzer attempted to get forward, but was interdicted south of Caen and at the bridges by naval gunfire and struggled to get through the rubble of the city to aid the collapsing front. According to Meyer, only 'A reinforced battalion of the 21st Panzer Division crossed the Orne that day.'

Eberbach was still with the *Hitlerjugend* when, as Kurt Meyer recalled, 'Alarming reports arrived that the enemy had broken through between the II and III/25th SS *Panzergrenadier* Regiment, that is to say, between Galmanche and Buron. He had taken St Contest and was able to bring the approaches to the Abbey d'Ardenne under fire.'

The survivors of the attack on Galmanche, lacking anti-tank guns, were unable to stop the Shermans of the East Riding Yeomanry advancing past their positions. There were, however, panzers in Buron under command of *Untersturmführer* Kandler, who brought his five Panzer IVs into action, motoring forward from his positions alongside III Battalion to engage British tanks advancing through the gap between Buron and Galmanche towards St Contest. He recorded:

> From this location we could engage the Englanders in their flank at almost 90 degrees. Although the range was between 800 and 1,000 metres, the flank of a Sherman made a larger target; it was also the thinnest armour and was more vulnerable than the frontal armour. My gunner Willy Schnittfinke had quick reactions, which was vital for our survival and responded to my orders and target indications over the intercom or by the pressure of my legs on his shoulder; he calmly identified the target with accuracy. We could easily see our hits and we alone knocked out five enemy tanks. We also engaged enemy infantry with our *Spandaus*; watching the tracer through the gun sight we could see that we inflicted heavy casualties and were forcing them to take cover. During this time, we fired 10,000 rounds of machine-gun ammunition.
>
> The area we fired from had plenty of hedges which provided us with

> cover and after firing we moved a short distance to new positions to stop the enemy targeting our muzzle flashes, consequently we did not lose a single panzer.[8]

The British infantry eventually reached St Contest, but they were pinned down by the *Hitlerjugend*'s fire in the ruins and they were unable to dig in until that evening. The 59th Division had penetrated the *Hitlerjugend*'s positions, but they had certainly not broken through. As during EPSOM, positions held out and small groups and individuals fought on, slowing the tempo of Allied operations throughout the day.

Attack by the 3rd Canadian Division: 8 July 1944

It had puzzled Kurt Meyer why the Canadians had not attacked the thinly-spread ranks of the 26th SS *Panzergrenadiers* and a handful of Panthers to the west of Caen, around Carpiquet, in the first phase of CHARNWOOD. Again, however, in Phase Two, the blow fell further north on III 25th *Panzergrenadiers* and the regimental support companies in Buron and Gruchy.

At 0730 hours the 3rd Canadian Division joined the battle, with its 9th Brigade attacking the villages with two battalions, preceded by another tremendous bombardment. A Canadian officer wrote: 'The artillery fire is unbelievable. Nothing like it has ever been heard. The dust is now so great as to obscure the sun.' The resulting fighting was at close range, as an entry in the 9th Canadian Brigade's war diary describes:

> … there were still those [Germans] who the shelling had left intact in slit-trenches and weapon-pits hidden amongst the grain, where they would wait with their automatic weapons, until our men stumbled blindly upon them. Realizing that we had carried the ditches, the defenders were quick to call down fire from their artillery and mortars, which soon played havoc among our thinning platoons: even the battalion command group suffered, for having followed in hard upon the heels of the riflemen, they now lay in the open field, insistently calling for support from their attendant squadron of 27 Cdn Armd Regt, against the enemy's machine-gun posts on the edge of the village.

Some of the 75mm anti-tank guns supporting the II Battalion had survived the bombardment and for a time knocked out the advancing Shermans. This, along with extensive minefields, effectively separated the Canadian armour from their infantry who were pinned down on the approaches to Buron and Gruchy. A Canadian war diary records that the infantry was 'under a hail of machine-gun fire into the barrages from artillery and rocket-launchers …' When the anti-tank guns were knocked out and the minefields breached by flail tanks, the Shermans were able, as indicated in the war diary, to close up and support the infantry in their break-in battle and fight through after 0800 hours. 'The tanks engaged with their own machine guns and high explosive' and out in the fields the *panzer-grenadiers* of the 9th Company were the first to be overwhelmed in hand-to-hand fighting. A Canadian officer recorded that the tanks then 'browsed about the slit trenches immediately in front of Buron, shooting up anything and everything' before turning against the villages: 'The outside edge of the village was energetically held by a ring of resistance pockets, most of which contained machine guns. They covered our troops with constant and annihilating fire, and it was almost impossible to get through.'

With the III Battalion surrounded in Buron, von Ribbentrop's 3rd Company, having been restored to a reasonable strength, was ordered by the 25th *Panzer-grenadiers* to counter-attack and drive the Canadians back from Buron. *Hauptsturmführer* von Ribbentrop recalled the attack with the SPWs (Hanomag half-tracks) of the III Battalion, which had significant firepower of their own:[9]

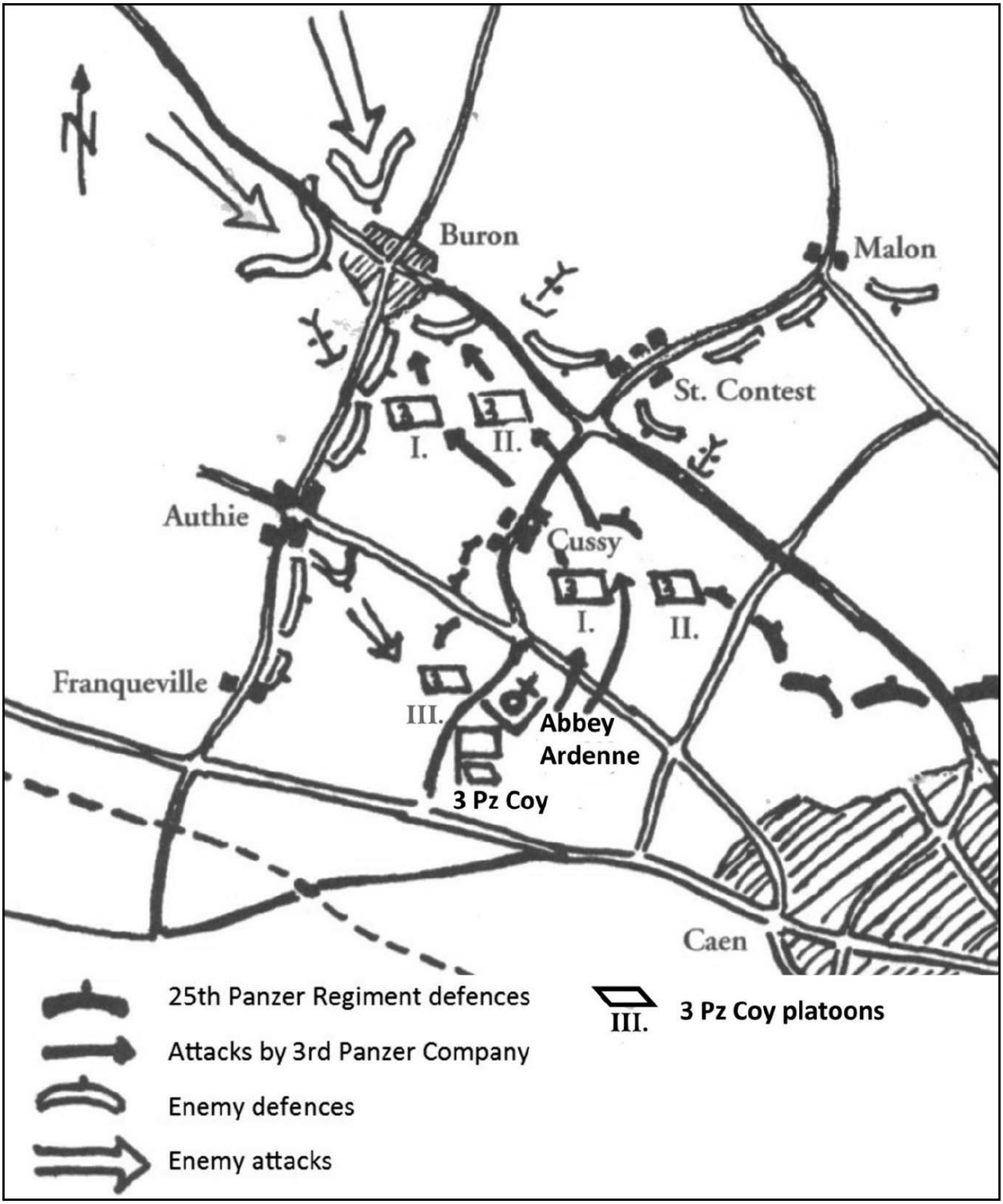
> Unfortunately, radio communication with the SPWs did not work, I could not speak to the commander of the SPWs, an army *Hauptmann* [Steger], by radio who could not in turn speak to his battalion headquarters in Buron and I stressed strongly from the turret of my panzer the absolute necessity of advancing together.[10,11]

Thus the attack began without proper coordination between panzers, SPWs and infantry. Von Ribbentrop continued: 'My company started the attack with one panzer platoon advancing to the left of Buron and two on the right. We advanced in two quick bounds, with a platoon taking turns to give

covering fire just as we had practised on exercise.’

Standartenführer Kurt Meyer.

Hauptmann Fritz Steiger, commander of II Battalion's half-tracks (right).



A sketch of the action of the 3rd Panzer Company at Buron on 8 July 1944.

Unterscharführer Freiberg was commanding the 3rd Panther Platoon on

the left, and recorded:

> Our first attack from the Monastery went in the wrong direction. When we tried to engage an enemy target our main gun failed. Since my crew could not repair it, I made the appropriate call on the radio. The answer was to continue on and use the panzer's machine guns. Driving fast, we crossed the open terrain to the village of Buron.
>
> As we were passing an opening in a wall there were two explosions and two Panthers burst into flames. We immediately fired the machine guns into the opening where I spotted movement followed by a flash and we were hit on the gun mantlet [the thickest armour on the Panther] and the armour-piercing shell fell into the tank and the gunner was wounded in the face. And I had a small splinter wound to my left arm. We, the turret crew, bailed out and because of the heavy fire took cover behind the panzer. The driver and radio-operator in the hull had not noticed what had happened and sat there with the engine idling. I remounted the panzer [onto the engine deck] and shouted 'Reverse march' through a throat mike which was hanging out of the turret.
>
> After a few metres backwards the aerial mount which I was using as a foothold was shot off along with my heel! After pulling back 500 metres we reached our grenadiers, where my gunner and loader had arrived on foot.[12]

Unterscharführer Heinz Freiberg.

Von Ribbentrop with the rest of the company was still in action:

> We reached the outskirts of the village and engaged some tanks but were now faced with a new problem around the village; the hedges and ditches, which were confusing. At that moment a Canadian Pak must have opened fire at that moment and two or three vehicles went up in flames to my right and we had no other option but to withdraw to the start line.
>
> From here the platoon on the left engaged a column of enemy tanks and supported the hard-pressed infantry in Buron. The rest of the company's panzers were positioned around the Abbey all day enduring heavy artillery fire but prevented the Canadians from advancing.

Without proper coordination and communication, the infantry in Buron could not be disengaged or helped. This attack once again cost the 3rd Company seven Panthers knocked out. The Canadian infantry were, however, paying a heavy price in the fighting for Buron. As elsewhere, the young soldiers of the *Hitlerjugend* were not prepared to give up positions amid the rubble of the villages. Gruchy, held by the regimental pioneer company, fell first, being reported by the Canadians as 'secure' at 0945 hours. It is recorded that the company was 'annihilated in the fighting'.

The fighting in Buron was 'bitter' and, according to a Canadian war diary, the last of the defenders 'were not uprooted until the next morning. Indeed, with casualties still mounting alarmingly under the continuous shelling and mortaring to which Buron was now being subjected, it soon became apparent that the battalion could get no farther.'

The division's 88mm guns and lighter flak weapons were engaging both air and ground targets throughout the battle, the latter firing some 2,000 HE and 2,800 AP rounds during the day.

With fierce fighting still going on in Buron, fresh Canadian troops were seen assembling in the orchards south of the village for an attack on Authie. Consequently, every gun, mortar and *Nebelwerfer* that could be spared was engaged and the next stage of the Canadian attack was forestalled for the time

being.

The 20mm *Flakvierling* on the hull of a Mark IV Panzer.

Based on his experience of fighting in Russia, *Standartenführer* Meyer was critical of the way the Allies used their armour on 8 July, of which they had a considerable superiority in numbers. Rather than overwhelm the German

defenders with bold dashes for the bridges that would unhinge the defences, instead he believed that the British and Canadian tanks were hanging back, supporting their infantry and thus making themselves vulnerable. He wrote:

> With the exception of the … artillery, the attack lacked momentum and initiative on the battlefield and was conducted … along tactical principles employed in World War I. You could only afford to conduct such warfare against an army that had already been bled white.

Even though most positions were holding out in the villages, Canadian attacks resumed at 1430 hours, preceded by the now familiar heavy bombardment which crept south towards Caen. The *Nebelwerfer* Regiment and every mortar in range engaged the Canadian infantry and tanks that were following close behind. Their advance flowed around Authie and Cussy towards the headquarters of the 25th *Panzergrenadiers* in the Abbey d'Ardenne. A crisis was developing.

By early afternoon, with most of II Battalion's Panzer IVs deployed to contain the enemy on the division's right flank, most of I Battalion, 12th SS Panzer Regiment was supporting the 25th *Panzergrenadiers* north of the Caen-Bayeux road. Their war diary reads:

> At 1300 hours [1500 Allied time] the 1st Company, commanded by *Hauptsturmführer* Berlin, and the Recce Platoon, commanded by *Untersturmführer* Fiala, with six and four panzers respectively, as well as two of the 3rd Company, were deployed in defending the Abbey d'Ardenne. During the artillery bombardment that lasted hours, two of the tanks of the 1st Company became total losses due to direct hits, and three more tanks were seriously damaged. One of the panzers of the Recce Platoon was hit in the fuel tank, and the track of another was hit. The Platoon Commander's panzer was hit by an anti-tank gun, though without any particular effect: the optics were damaged, and the turret machine gun was out of action because of the hit. During these engagements the 1st Company knocked out four Shermans, the Recce Platoon five Shermans, an anti-tank gun and one or two companies of enemy infantry, partly in close combat.

The crisis had been averted, with the advance of the Canadian tanks being finally halted within 100 yards of the abbey buildings and driven back. The *panzer-grenadiers* then had to force enemy infantry out of the surrounding hedgerows and orchards. The aid station in the abbey was now overflowing with casualties.

Kurt ‘Panzer’ Meyer, who was on the scene, ordered *Hauptsturmführer* Ribbentrop to exploit success. Two platoons of the 3rd Panzer Company were tasked to relieve the remnants of III Battalion which were still holding out in Buron. Even though the enemy Shermans had fallen back, the Panthers advanced into a screen of 17-pounders[13] established by the Canadian’s anti-tank regiment. They quickly lost more panzers and III Battalion remained surrounded.

The Abbey d’Ardenne after the battle. In the foreground is a knocked-out Fiat 626N ambulance.

The hamlet of Cussy was held by a battery of the 12th SS Anti-Aircraft Battalion who found themselves fighting as infantrymen as well as, alongside their battery commander, serving the surviving three guns. They were eventually overwhelmed during the evening with every soldier being either killed or captured.

As numbers of *panzergrenadiers* holding out in the villages dwindled thanks to repeated bombardment and attack, the Allies gradually gained control and the *Hitlerjugend* could do little more than wait for nightfall.

The 3rd Canadian Division had a hard fight through the *Hitlerjugend*'s forward defences and suffered considerable losses. They had, however, been able to make greater progress than the 59th into the more weakly-held southern sector and it was here that an attempt to drive into the centre of Caen to secure the Orne bridges was launched. The armoured cars and carriers of the Canadian Recce Regiment advanced straight down the N13, but did not get far before they were halted in the suburb of St Germain.

The one battalion of the 25th SS *Panzergrenadiers* that had held out with its positions largely intact was *Sturmbannführer* Waldmüller's I Battalion out in the fields between the railway line near La Bijude and Galmanche. This was due to a combination of effective siting of defences and mutual support with the 7th Company in Galmanche, plus the Canadian priority of taking the villages.

A wounded Panzer IV crewman of the 6th Panzer Company being treated by *panzergrenadiers*.

The Withdrawal South of the Orne

By early evening it was obvious that Hitler's order to hold Caen was no longer viable. The 3rd British Division, having carved their way through the Luftwaffe Field Division, was already entering the northern and eastern outskirts of the city, where their main problem was the rubble. The prospect, however, of the total destruction of the *Hitlerjugend* loomed, with the 3rd Canadian and 59th divisions threatening to envelop the division if it held its positions for much longer, especially as stocks of artillery ammunition were now very low.

Consequently, *Sturmbannführer* Hubert Meyer rang SS *Brigadeführer* Krämer at headquarters I SS Panzer Corps and explained the situation. Krämer, realizing the impossibility of holding on for another day without destruction and the implication of ignoring a Führer Order, quietly said that 'being thrown back while fighting a superior enemy could never be considered a withdrawal contrary to orders'. A tacit way out had been found. Rommel, however, subsequently approved the limited move of all artillery

assets south of the Orne, which made the ‘fighting withdrawal’ seem more substantial.

Orders for the withdrawal were promptly prepared and disseminated. Possibly Hubert Meyer’s most important piece of staff work as the divisional 1a (chief of staff) in the entire battle is quoted here at length:

> Regiment 25 will withdraw its battalions to the edge of Caen after nightfall. Before this, the battle-ready heavy weapons will have moved positions and be ready to fire.
>
> Divisional Escort Company and III/26 will cover the withdrawal and redeployment. The III/26 will expand the rear positions established by the Escort Company with strongpoints on both sides.
>
> Panzer Regiment 12, in cooperation with Regiment 25, will free those parts of the Regiment that are cut off and encircled.
>
> *Panzergrenadier* Regiment 1 will establish contact with I Battalion on the left wing of III/26 and maintain contact, as previously, with the [10th SS] *Frundsberg* Division.
>
> Together with the units still in action in the bridgehead, the artillery and mortars will move positions to the southern bank of the Orne. They will cover the disengagement of Regiment 25 and I/1 LAH [*Leibstandarte*] with fire strikes, and then delay any pursuit with harassing fire.
>
> After nightfall, Flak Battalion 12 will move to the southern bank of the Orne and take up positions so as to defend the Orne bridge from air attacks in co-operation with the Flak Regiment of III Flak Corps.
>
> Recce Battalion 12 will reconnoitre in the right flank of the Division and will guard the approaches to Caen and to the Orne bridge in Caen.
>
> Pioneer Battalion 12 will keep the Orne bridge in Caen open and prepare it for demolition. This demolition may only take place on orders from the Division.
>
> The Divisional command post will be moved to Caen-South (Faubourg de Vaucelles). Signal Battalion 12 will prepare communication links to the new location.
>
> Plans for 9 July: Regiment 25 and Regiment 1 will move into new defensive positions during the night 8/9 July on the southern bank of the

> Orne from the eastern edge of Vaucelles to the bend of the Orne (Regiment 25), from there to the north of Louvigny to the west of Éterville (Regiment 1). The III/26, with attached Divisional Escort Company, will cover the withdrawal. It will then pull back, in a fighting withdrawal, to the Orne bridge, and be the last to cross the Orne. The artillery will have the same mission as above. It is important to gain time for the move into the new defensive positions.[14]

As darkness fell, the fighting ebbed away, the exhausted *panzergrenadiers* exfiltrated from the villages and forward positions, slipping away into Caen and south of the river largely unmolested, with divisional headquarters moving at 0400 hours and opening in the village of Garcelles. The Canadian view of the withdrawal is that it was ‘a masterpiece of extrication’. Kurt Meyer provides a vivid impression of the division that night:

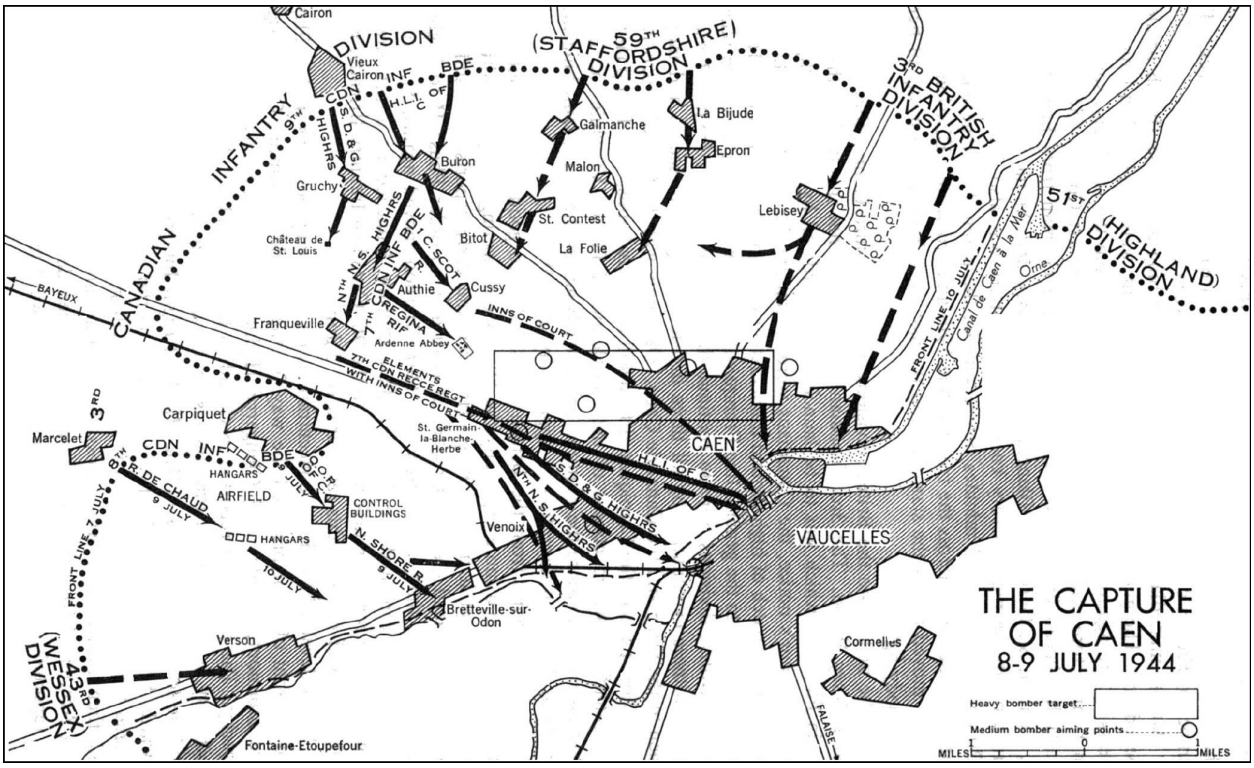
> They had arrived in Normandy with fresh, blooming faces. Now, camouflaged, muddy steel helmets hid emaciated faces whose eyes had, all too often, looked into another world. The men presented a picture of deep human misery. But it was immaterial; they couldn’t be allowed to rest any longer. They had to defend the Orne. Waldmüller received his new orders and dragged his men from their leaden sleep, with every grenadier having to be woken individually. They staggered drowsily out of the bunker and hung their ammunition around their necks; the heavy machine-gun belts dragged the half-asleep soldiers forward. Swearing, they hitched themselves to two of the heavy infantry guns and headed down towards the burning city. Two German panzers on the northern approaches covered the withdrawal.

In the aftermath of Operation CHARNWOOD, the fighting qualities of the German soldier and the *Hitlerjugend* in particular were summed up by a Canadian officer in an intelligence summary:

> Tactically in spite of very severe loses, difficulties in finding divisions to stem the tide and a chaotic line of communication, the German is a tough fighter as ever and is determined to give up nothing without a fight. He may be aided not too brilliantly by Poles, Russians [etc.] …

but as long as there are Germans with ammunition and petrol the fight will go on whatever the cost.

A wounded *Hitlerjugend* soldier taken prisoner by Canadians of the 3rd Division.



The Canadian *Official History* map of operations on 8 and 9 July.

The dogged fighting during 8 July had, however, cost the division in the region of 1,000 men, killed wounded or missing, principally in the 25th SS *Panzer-grenadiers*. They had suffered the same fate as their comrades had during EPSOM.

9 July 1944

When the Allied advance resumed, they still reported opposition in pockets across the front who fought for most of the morning. Hubert Meyer concluded that these were ‘individual pockets of resistance which had regrettably not received the order to withdraw’. In accordance with orders there were those such as III Battalion and the Divisional Escort Company which conducted a fighting withdrawal covered by the division’s remaining two batteries of 88mm guns.

One of the division’s armoured cars in Caen on 9 July.

In the division’s area I British Corps’ and Canadian recce regiments led a cautious advance into the devastation of the city, followed by the 7th Canadian Brigade. One incident during the morning illustrates that the earlier levels of animosity between the Allies and the *Hitlerjugend* had subsided. Three members of the Escort Company were burying a comrade, who had

been killed during the morning's preliminary bombardment, in a quarry on the northern outskirts of Caen. They were surrounded by a group of soldiers of the 59th Division but continued digging and having erected a very basic cross and said prayers, much to their surprise, they were allowed to walk away.

Once into the city Allied progress was slow with roads blocked with smashed masonry, so the division's rear guards had little difficulty in withdrawing. The Escort Company and III 26th SS *Panzergrenadiers* eventually crossed the river at 1600 hours and the divisional pioneers blew the last remaining bridge. The Allies, however, had with the 26th *Panzergrenadiers* withdrawn from the Carpiquet barrack area, closed up to the line of the Orne and Odon by the end of the day. They made no attempt at seizing bridgeheads.

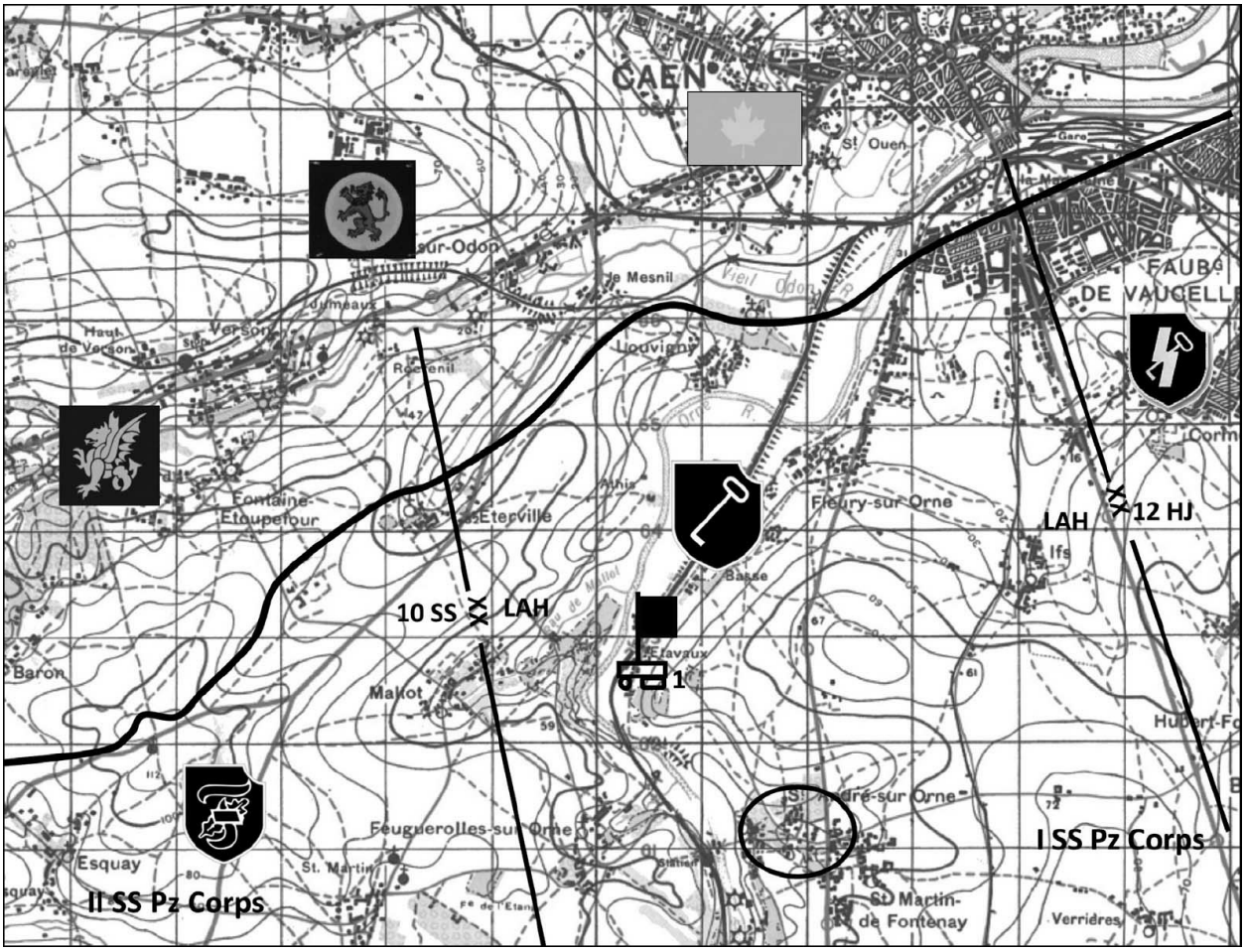
10 July: Operation JUPITER, the Loss of Hill 112

With the Allies having run out of steam in the ruins of Caen but having closed up to the Orne, they still needed to secure the crossings of the river to gain access to the open country south to Falaise. According to Montgomery: 'It will be some days before we are ready to make a big effort and must in the meantime keep the pot boiling'; i.e. keep the German panzer divisions fixed, particularly as the 9th SS *Hohenstaufen* Panzer Division had already been extracted from the line west of Hill 112.

The 10th *Frundsberg* SS Panzer Division held Hill 112 and the *Leibstandarte* (LAH) had taken the 1st SS *Panzergrenadiers* back under command and were in position to the west of the Orne responsible for holding the triangle of ground between the Orne and the Odon centred on Louvigny, up to and including the eastern portion of Éterville. East of the river the LAH held the ground up to the Caen-Falaise road. The *Hitlerjugend* were deployed in the southern suburbs of Caen to the east of the road, but most of the 12th SS Panzer Regiment was deployed in the open country west of the Orne supporting the *Leibstandarte*.

The attack began with a short sharp bombardment, with its main weight falling on the *Frundsberg* on Hill 112. The British 43rd Wessex Division completed the first phase of its attack, gaining a substantial foothold on the

northern edge of the plateau, but was unable to make further progress across the broad expanse of the Hill. On the low ground Château Fontaine-Étoupefour was lost and the enemy were fighting the *Frundsberg* and the LAH in Éterville. With enemy tanks enveloping Éterville and threatening to advance on Maltot and the Orne, it was not long before the *Hitlerjugend*'s panzers were in action.



The deployment south-west of Caen on 10 July 1944.

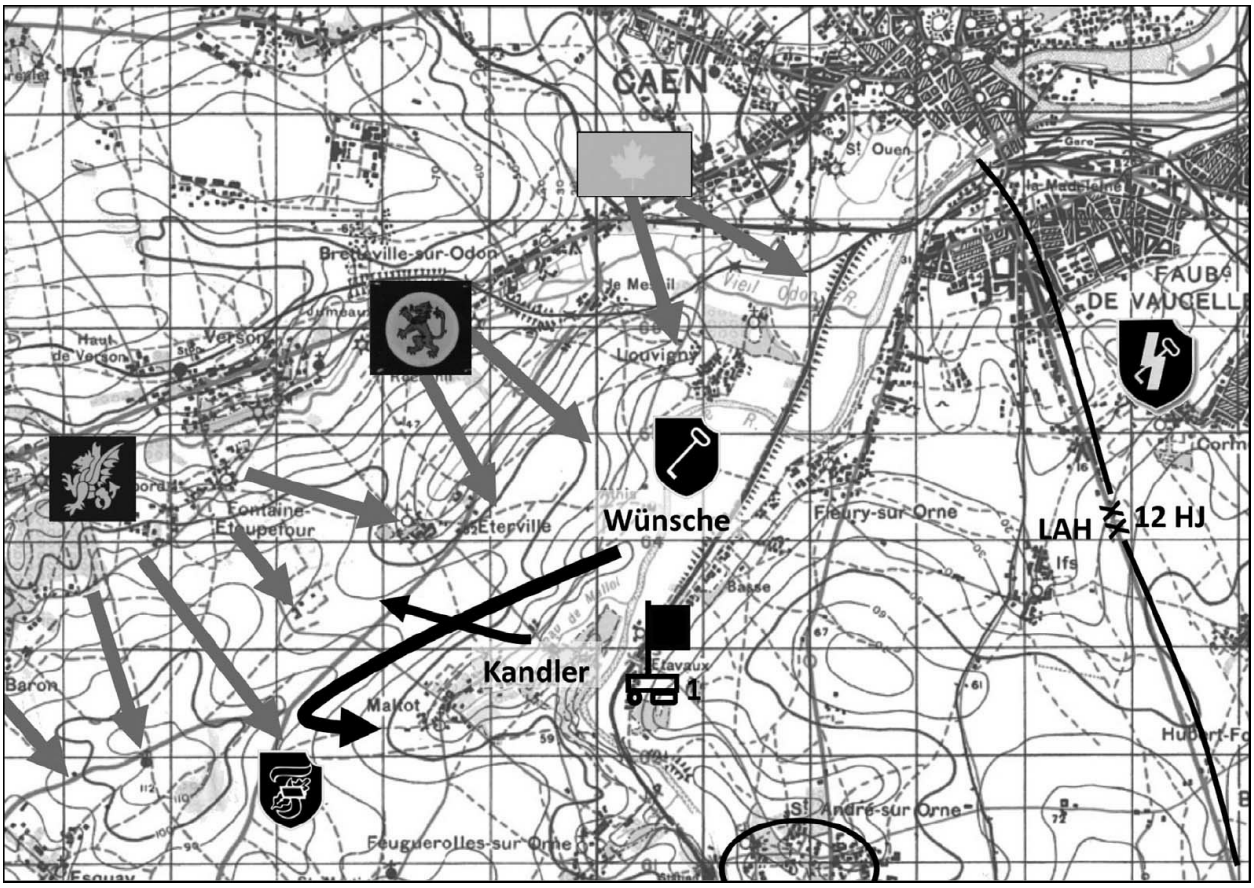
As explained by *Sturmbannführer* Hubert Meyer, *Untersturmführer* Kandler's platoon of Panzer IVs moved forward and

> At approximately 7 or 8am in the morning, he observed the enemy laying a smoke screen between Éterville and Maltot. He advanced with his panzer in order to gain an open field of view. After some 200 to 300-metres, Kändler encountered German infantry in their positions.

> Because of the smoke which also covered their positions, they were somewhat apprehensive. After he had crossed the lane leading from the northeastern exit from Maltot to the Éterville church, he spotted a tracked enemy vehicle racing at full speed along the road from Étoupefour to Maltot. He opened fire, and the first shot by his gunner, *Sturmmann* Schnittfinke, scored a direct hit on the vehicle which went up in flames. He drove onward to the road fork 1.5-kilometers northeast of Hill 112 and, to his great surprise, spotted a large armor unit rolling diagonally from the north across the eastern slope of Hill 112, apparently in the direction of Feuguerolles and St. Martin. He immediately called the other two panzers of his platoon, commanders *Unterscharführer* Jürgens and *Rottenführer* Biback, on the radio to come over to his position. Then he reported to his company chief who cautioned him about engaging in battle. When his three panzers were assembled, they opened fire. Kändler's panzer knocked out seven tanks, the number of kills achieved by the other two are not known. When English ambulances drove onto the battlefield to rescue the wounded, firing was stopped. Then, the panzers came themselves under fire from Éterville. One of them was rendered immobile. *Untersturmführer* Kändler took it in tow and withdrew with his three panzers to his starting position.

By the afternoon with a fire-fight going on across the open top of Hill 112, all available panzers including some sent west by the 21st Panzer Division and the Tigers of 102 Heavy Panzer Battalion were tasked to retake Maltot and eject the British from the northern edge of the plateau. Late afternoon the attack began with the panzers rolling successfully onto the plateau, but before they could attack the British infantry the enemy artillery intervened with its full force and drove the panzers back to their starting-point.

Erich Bissoir’s motorcycle platoon during the wait for the invasion.



The 12th SS Panzer Regiment's counter-attacks against Hill 122, 10 July 1944.

Sturmmann Erich Bissoir, who drove Max Wünsche's motorcycle and sidecar from a briefing east of the Orne to the forming-up place in the low ground southeast of Maltot, summarized the attack:

> In the afternoon of 10 July, I took *Obersturmbannführer* Wünsche to our panzers which were lined up behind an embankment, ready for a counterattack. The orchard on top of the hill was occupied by strong armoured forces and the earth was dug up by the attack of our *Nebelwerfers*.
>
> Our panzers started rolling but picking up speed was impossible, as there were craters and dead cattle strewn everywhere. The sun was burning on their bloated corpses and made them smell horrible. It was a gruesome sight, those dead cows with their stiff legs pointing in the air.
>
> The panzers sent shell after shell into the enemy ranks which were in complete chaos by then. We managed to recapture the hill, though it was

only for a short while.[15] As soon as our soldiers had taken their places on the hill, Tommy started his counter-attack. I remember Hill 112 was captured & recaptured several times with huge losses on both sides as a consequence.

At the end of Operation JUPITER Hill 112 remained, as had been the case during EPSOM, as no man's land for nearly a month.

A *HJ* Panzer IV and its young crew.

A group of young recipients of the Iron Cross Second Class.

Chapter Seven

Operations South of Caen

Finally, after five weeks in action, the *Hitlerjugend* were relieved in the line. It had originally been intended that the 271st Infantry Division would take over their positions, but this division was delayed on the long march from southern France and directed for a time east of the Seine, where the OKW still expected another landing. Consequently, the *Leibstandarte* took over the division's front south of Caen on 11 July and it was a weary and sadly depleted division that marched to hides in villages between 8 and 18 miles south towards Falaise. Some of the more technical units returned to the pre-invasion locations where a portion of their logistics was still based.

In the weeks between the invasion and being extracted from the line the division had suffered losses of between 3,500 and 6,164 men,[1] with casualties having been particularly heavy among the *panzergrenadiers*. Without the usual replacement battalion (*Feldersatzbattalion*), the SS training depots back at, for instance, Oosterbeek (*panzergrenadiers*) and Riga (panzer crewmen) were under pressure to send trained soldiers forward.[2] Contrary to conventional wisdom, as we will see, manpower replacements were forthcoming in significant numbers. These replacements, however, never matched the rate at which casualties mounted and unit strengths continued to wane.

During this period a divisional convalescent company was established to take in soldiers rejoining from hospital for eventual return to their units. Among those returning from hospital in Paris during this period was *Hauptsturmführer* Hans Siegel, who was wounded during EPSOM. Clearly not fully fit, Siegel took over the responsibility for the division's senior NCO

training. II Panzer Battalion's war diary records: 'Only after regaining their full readiness for service will they be sent back to their companies.'

The numbers of panzers available is indicative of the levels of equipment casualties: there were just ten operational Panzer IVs[3] and thirteen Panthers. As to manpower, there were virtually no immediate replacements, although the 12th SS Panzer Regiment dispatched crews to pick up replacement panzers,[4] but most of these tanks would not arrive in time for the Battle of Normandy.[5]

All that the members of the division could do was sleep, reorganize their units and repair their clothing and equipment. As usual, the workshops performed wonders in bringing the 12th SS Panzer Regiment up to 21/101 Panzer IVs and 17/79 Panthers, but such were the losses of men in the infantry battalions and the lack of replacements, a reorganization had to take place. Consequently, understrength companies and battalions were amalgamated into battalion-sized *Kampfgruppen* (*Kg*). The division's main combat units, which on 16 July totalled little more than the strength of an infantry regiment and a panzer battalion, were as follows:[6]

Resting out of the line. Soldiers sleep in a tent made up of *zeltbahns* (tent quarters) buttoned together.

Kg Waldmüller: I and II Bn 25 Pz Gr
Kg Krause: I and II Bn 26 Pz Gr
Div Escort Company
Kg Wünsche: 12 Pz Regt and III 26 Pz Gr (Olböter's)[7]

The recce and pioneer battalions were at approximately company strength.

In the *Hitlerjugend*, immediate awards of medals were made by regimental commanders throughout the campaign, mainly for bravery. Once out of the line, Max Wünsche decorated dispatch and recce motorcyclist *Sturmmann* Erich Bissor, who had been in action alongside him and the panzers throughout the fighting west of Caen. 'At our latest HQ in Château Quesnay, together with some comrades I received the Iron Cross Class II and received a promotion.'

During their time out of the line the Führer, wanting to preserve the *Hitlerjugend* from destruction and because he expected FUSAG to land at the Pas-de-Calais, ordered von Kluge to move them all back to their pre-invasion locations under command of the Fifteenth Army. Despite protests and the increasing likelihood of the next Allied offensives, the Führer and his staff would not be swayed. So it was that *Kampfgruppe* Wünsche marched back to Lisieux on the night of 14 July, with the rest of the *Kampfgruppen* expected to follow over subsequent nights.

During the march to Lisieux, no doubt informed of the move by ULTRA, US Lightning aircraft were constantly overhead seeking out the panzer regiment's columns, but by now expert in avoiding attention from the air, trailing branches behind each vehicle, they dashed from cover to cover. The aircraft were, however, so persistent that it provided an opportunity for the concentration of the regiment's not inconsiderable 20 and 37mm flak assets for a successful anti-aircraft ambush, which shot down all three Lightnings overhead at that time. This ambush tactic of concentrated fire, developed as a result of much salutary experience, had developed into a standard procedure in the forward battle area and on march routes; it was very successful, as Allied air casualties testify.

While at Lisieux a company of the 12th SS *Panzerjäger* Battalion joined the division, having missed the early part of the campaign due to equipment availability and training issues.[8] To make up for the lack of panzers the company was grouped with *Kampfgruppe* Wünsche. On 16 July the II/12 SS Panzer Regiment was re-formed under *Sturmbannführer* Karl Heinz Prinz as a 'depot' and training panzer organization when they received seventeen replacement Panzer IVs crewed by two officers and sixty-one other ranks, who had collected the panzers from Linz.[9] This brought the strength of II Battalion up to thirty-eight Panzer IVs, which required one senior NCO and forty-two panzer crewmen from the replacement battalion. Prinz supervised the distribution of manpower and panzers to the 1st, 4th, 6th and 7th companies who would remain with II Battalion for further training. The 7th Company was almost fully formed with fifteen Panzer IVs and trained soldiers. The remaining companies had two Panthers and four Panzer IVs but received further panzers from repair.

Sd.Kfz.251s belonging to the 2nd Company, III-26th *Panzergrenadiers*.

Obersturmbannführer Wilhelm Mohnke presenting Iron Crosses during the battle.

1939

The Iron Cross II Class.

A young *panzergrenadier* recipient of the Iron Cross.

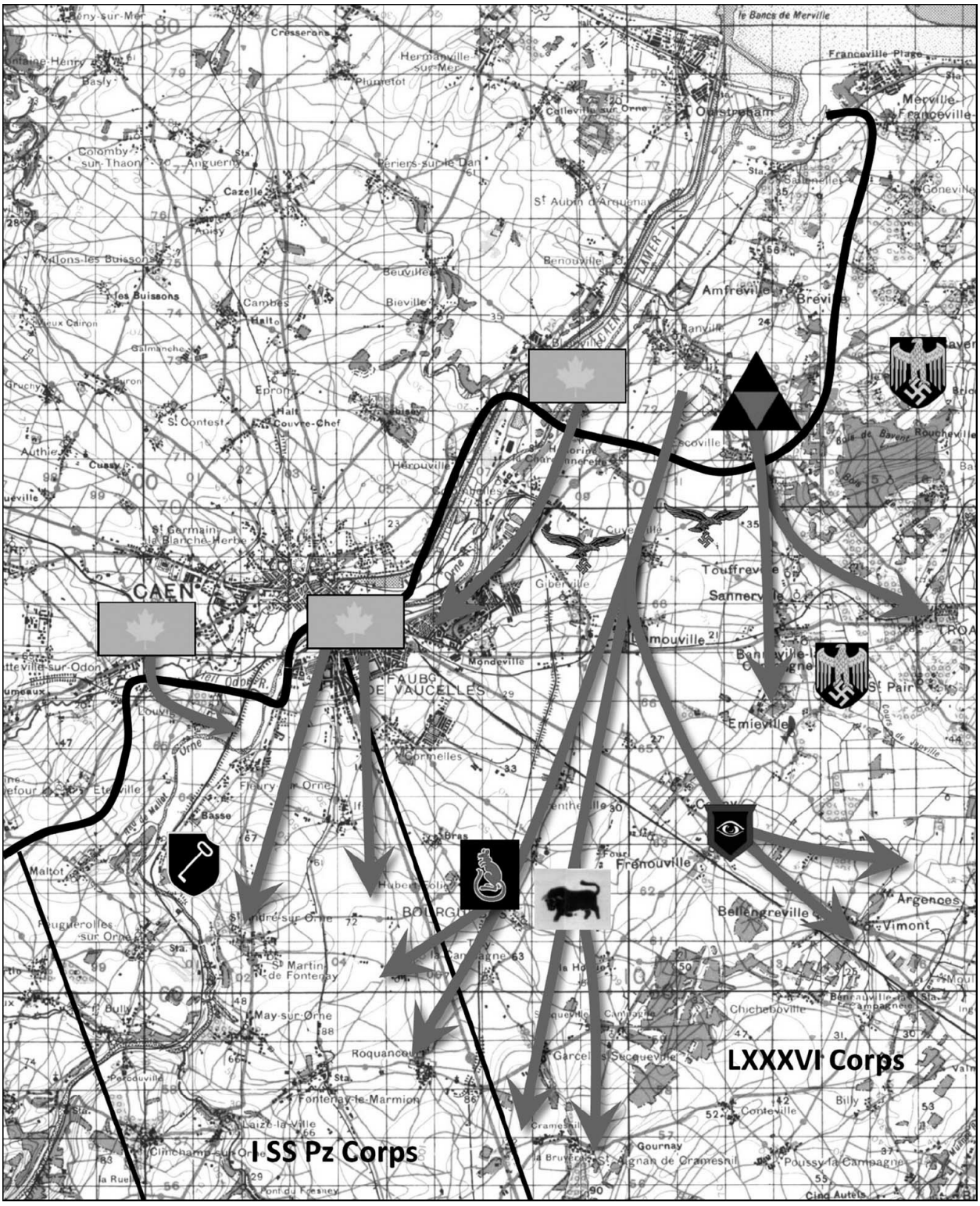
Before the rest of the division could follow Wünsche's *Kampfgruppe*, the scale of the coming Allied offensive became obvious when Luftwaffe aircraft with the aid of flares took photographs of the one-way traffic over the Orne and Canal bridges north of Caen during the night of 16/17 July. The division's move was delayed and then cancelled and was subsequently ordered back into the line south-east of Caen to contain GOODWOOD.

Operation GOODWOOD: 18–20 July 1944

With US combat power still constrained by fighting in the hedgerow country, as they advanced south to St Lo and the line of departure for Operation COBRA, there was a continuing need to fix the Germans against the Allied eastern flank. The British, however, were suffering unsustainably heavy infantry casualties, but with the country south-east of Caen and on down to Falaise being more open, it was suitable for an armoured advance. Consequently, the three British armoured divisions would spearhead an attack designed to 'alarm' the enemy and 'dictate his deployment'. Alongside the tanks, infantry divisions of I and the II Canadian corps were to advance, covering the armour division's flanks.

Such was the political and military pressure to break out from the beachhead that many assumed that this was 'the break-out' rather than a draw and fix operation to support the Americans. Montgomery had to send out a tersely-worded reminder to his corps commanders that they were first and foremost to 'engage and destroy the enemy'.

A *Jagdpanzer* IV, mounting the same L48 75mm gun as the Panzer IV.



Operation GOODWOOD Plan, 18 July 1944.

In GOODWOOD the British were to use a similar methodology as before: heavy bombers and a crushing artillery bombardment. Then, having initially

advanced on a narrow front east of the Orne, as the ground opened up further south they were to broaden their frontage with all three armoured divisions advancing abreast. The objective was the high ground of the Bourguébus Ridge.

The battle began at 0500 hours, with the bombing by no fewer than 2,077 British and US heavy and medium aircraft, which dropped a total of 6,732 tons of ordnance on German positions in front of the initial advance by the 11th Armoured Division, as well as ahead of the flanking infantry divisions. The bombing and the following artillery bombardment by 760 guns was designed to blast the Allied tanks through the German defences which were expected to be up to 5 miles deep.

In the event the 11th Armoured Division sliced through the forward defences of the 16th Luftwaffe Field Division, who were badly shaken and capable of little resistance. The next layer of defences was a different matter. That was provided by the 125th *Panzergrenadier* Regiment, who were supported by Assault Gun Battalion 200[10] and used the cover and shelter of the villages, approximately 1,000 yards apart, to produce a zone of overlapping and interlocking arcs of fire about 3.5 miles deep. The British armour pressed on, but with two railway lines to cross and increasing losses to anti-tank fire, their momentum slowed. For the Germans, however, by late morning this advance of nearly 5 miles was a grave concern with only a screen of 88mm guns (both anti-aircraft and anti-tank) and the 21st Panzer Division's Recce Battalion in depth on the Bourguébus Ridge.

I SS Panzer Corps were ordered to send the *Leibstandarte* forward to block the Canadians south of Caen but above all to hold the Bourguébus Ridge and the villages on its forward slope and then mount counter-attacks against the three British armoured divisions. By dusk the *Leibstandarte* and the balance of the 21st Panzer Division was able to contain the British who had lost some 381 tanks during the day.

Meanwhile, in their hide areas further south the *Hitlerjugend* had at 1500 hours also received orders to return to the front. Going on ahead, the divisional commanders and staff carried out a reconnaissance of the narrow section of the line that they were to take over, astride the Caen-Vimoutiers road (D613), from 21st Panzer, which would be to their right, with the

Leibstandarte to their left. Overnight *Kampfgruppe* Wünsche drove from Lisieux, while the majority of the infantry marched north back towards the sound of battle, where the British Guards Armoured Division had been brought to a halt.

The relief of a portion of the 21st Panzer Division's over-extended line at Frénouville and its adjacent châ by *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller began at 0530 hours. Fortunately, troops of the Guards Armoured Division, who were only gingerly moving beyond Cagny, did not intervene, although VIII Corps reported that the two armoured regiments 'by midday had not been able to advance'.[11] In fact, there was a hiatus during the morning while VIII British Corps considered their next move after the shocking loss of tanks the previous day. After corps issued fresh orders, the battle resumed in earnest in the late afternoon with the main weight of the attack falling further west on the *Leibstandarte*.

The 12th SS *Panzerjäger* Battalion

Along with the Werfer Battalion, the *Hitlerjugend*'s *Panzerjäger* Battalion was not operational at the time of the invasion, having only very recently received ten of its *Jagdpanzer* IVs. The two SP companies were training in the area of Nogent-le-Roi, with five vehicles each. Not least of the training issues was learning how to cope with the mechanical unreliability of a newly-introduced vehicle.

A further eleven *Jagdpanzers* arrived on 21 June, bringing the SP companies almost up to strength and training for battle continued. On 1 July the 1st Company drove the 100 miles from the division's original concentration area just west of the Seine to the divisional rear area in Bois du Roi just north of Falaise.

Jagdpanzer IVs arrive straight off the production line.

The 1st Company's first combat deployment was in the aftermath of the fall of Caen on 10 July, when it supported the 25th *Panzergrenadiers* on the high ground south of the city around Ifs. The company went back into reserve when the division was replaced in the line by ordinary infantry.

After only days of rest, they were back in the line on 19 July blocking the Guards Armoured Division between Cagny and Frénouville where they gained their first kill, a Guards Armoured Division Sherman.

A well-camouflaged *HJ* Pak 40 and crew.

The Sd.Kfz.3 Maultier prime mover as used in the 3rd Company.

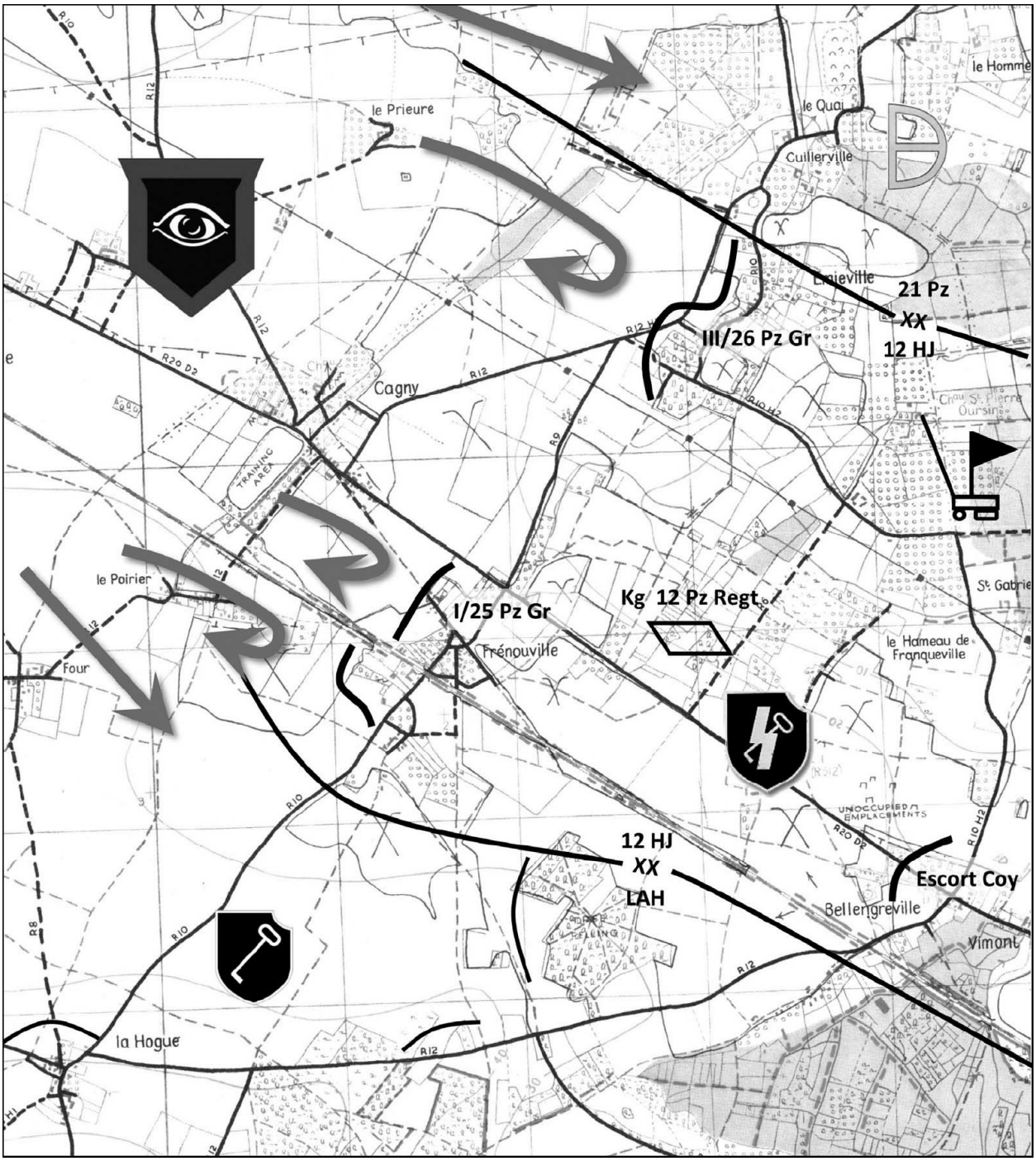
On 21 July the 3rd Company finally received six 75mm Pak 40 guns, which were towed by Maultiers that were promptly sent across Normandy to join the division. They

were followed by Battalion Headquarters, the 2nd Company and the logistic echelon, with the guns going into the line between 1 and 2 August.

When TOTALIZE began on the night of 7/8 August the 2nd Company was already deployed supporting the 272nd Division, but it was I Company that was rushed forward into action overnight, slowing the Allied advance on the road to Falaise. The 3rd Company also came into the line around Cintheaux.

In subsequent actions, as the number of panzers dwindled, the *Panzerjäger* took a more prominent role and it is no coincidence that three members of the battalion were awarded the Knight's Cross.

Knight's Cross awards, Normandy: (left) *Obersturmführer* Georg Hurdelbrink, commander of 1st Company. (centre) *Oberscharführer* Rudolf Roy, platoon commander. (right) *Rottenführer* Fritz Eckstein, gunner.



The deployment of the *Hitlerjugend*'s *Kampfgruppen* on 19 July 1944. This Allied tactical overprint map shows shaded areas of poor going (wet) and the 'crossed hockey sticks' marking the presence of 'Rommel's asparagus' anti-glide poles.

On the division's opposite flank, *Kampfgruppe* Olböter took up positions in Émiéville, with *Kampfgruppe* Krause coming in the centre. A company of panzers, even though the first of the *Panzeräger* had arrived, joined in

providing the antitank capability. In contrast to the long front held by the division at the beginning of the campaign, the frontage was now little over 3 miles. The Divisional Escort Company provided depth to the defences, while the panzers and the artillery remained in cover, dispersed in the villages of Airan, Moult and Argences, 3 miles to the rear. Kurt Meyer set up his tactical headquarters in the hamlet of Ruel, with the remains of the Recce and Pioneer battalions. The deployment was complete by midday.

II Panzer Battalion was still reorganizing and training, so it was only the Panthers and one company of Panzer IVs and the *Panzerjäger* that were deployed forward. *Sturmmann* Erich Bissor of the 12th SS Panzer Regiment's recce platoon recorded:

> Our motorcycle recce platoon was continuously making trips to check routes and defensive positions. On one occasion we were driving towards Cagny at dusk to see where the enemy was and in what sort of strength. Visibility was so bad that we came across enemy units only when we were right on top of them. The British or Canadians were apparently so busy preparing their next attack that they didn't notice us before we turned at full throttle back towards our own lines. We reached our lines and HQ unharmed and reported what we had seen. The next morning the Allied attack was withheld with an Allied loss of about 60 tanks.

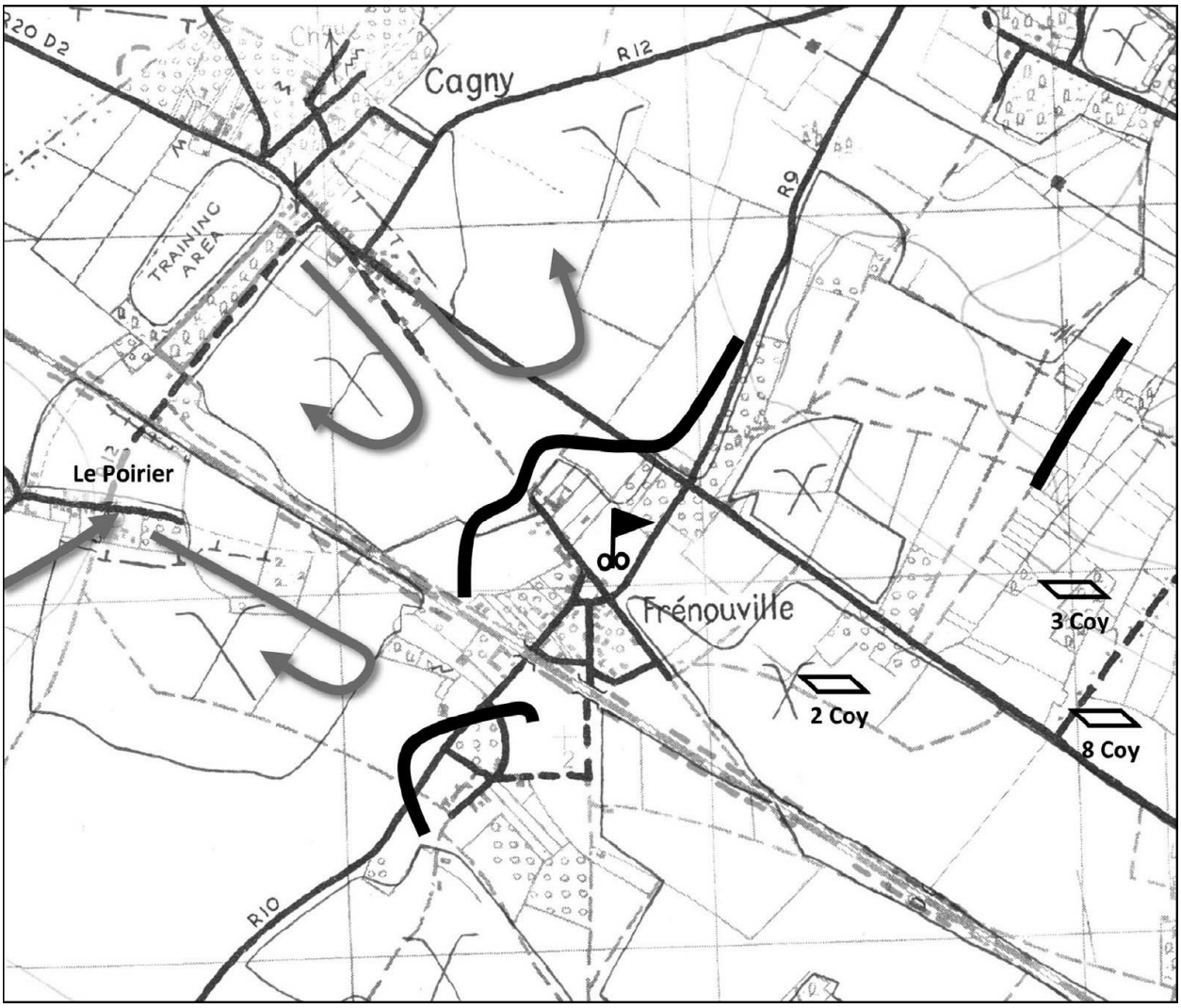
Herman Bull was with his battery in an orchard between Moult and Airan:

> We had dug down into the yellow rocky soil all morning to protect our guns. It was quiet, just the usual, which is not what we expected when we returned to the front. Everything was ready and after a night with little rest we all fell asleep around our guns. And then it started; the enemy were shelling our infantry in the forward positions. Within a few minutes all was activity as the officer shouted fire instructions and we were loading and firing away.

Sturmbannführer Bernard ‘Papa’ Krause.

Sturmmann Erich Bissor.

It was during the evening, when the Guards infantry had reached and secured Cagny and advanced on the forward *Kampfgruppen* of the division at Émiéville and Frénouville. Of the two, the attack on the latter village was more serious, with Waldmüller calling on the support of the 1st Company, 12th SS *Panzerjäger* Battalion. The inexperienced Guards infantry were seen coming down the road through the ruins on the outskirts of the village and were badly shot up and halted. They tried again, moving through the corn parallel to the road, but German illuminating shells caught them in the open and they were heavily engaged by the *Hitlerjugend*'s artillery and mortars. Consequently, a part of the enemy battalion was forced back and dug in beyond a crest line, but in the darkness another company reached the orchards and hedgerows around Frénouville and took up defensive positions as best they could at close quarters with the *panzergrenadiers* before withdrawing. Another attack was launched against Waldmüller's more isolated position south of the railway line, but this was also successfully defeated.



Kampfgruppe Waldmüller's action in the evening of 19 July 1944.

At Émiéville, Olböter's *panzergrenadiers* beat off an attack by the Irish Guards, who were supported by the tanks of the Coldstream Guards, with their own infantry gun platoon and mortars providing close support. The Guards, however, record their first 'highly unpleasant' experience of the 'Moaning Minnies'[12] of the 12th SS *Werfer* Battalion's *Nebelwerfers* which were in support.

The attacks during the evening of the 19th were in no way a serious resumption of the British offensive and were not at all what had been expected by the *Hitlerjugend*.

During the evening there was one of the rare interventions by German aircraft in Normandy, which saw a Luftwaffe general travelling from Holland

to witness the strike by what VIII Corps described as a ‘circus of thirty fighter-bombers’. These were Me 110s, which attacked a number of targets across the GOOD-WOOD area, including the *Hitlerjugend* in Cagny. The first wave of aircraft struck the village, but the second wave ‘bombed back’ and hit Waldmüller’s *Kampfgruppe* and the onlooking Luftwaffe officers. No casualties were incurred by the *Hitlerjugend* or the Guards.[13]

20 July 1944

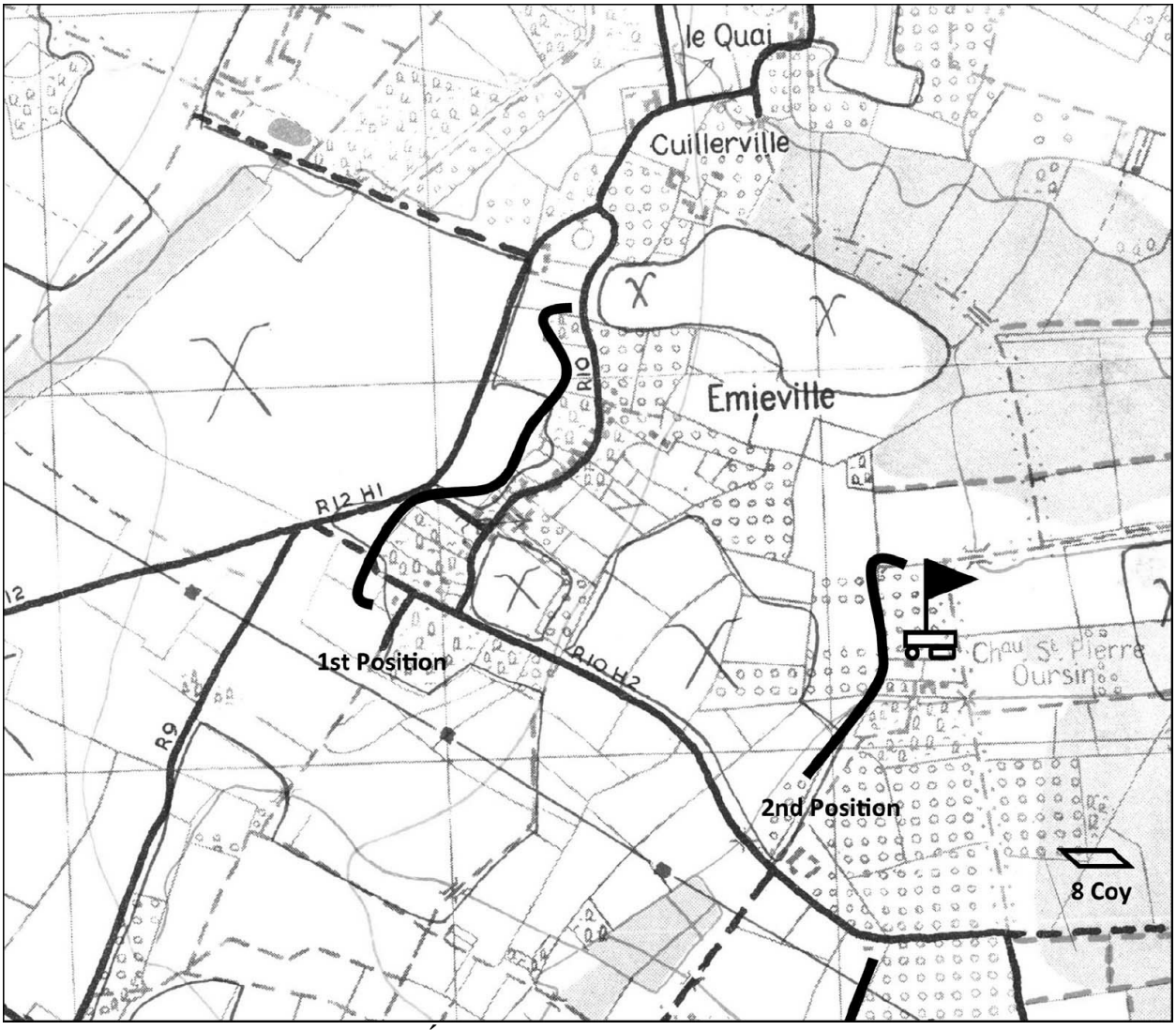
The Guards Armoured Division resumed its attacks with artillery, armour and infantry on the forward villages the following morning, but both Waldmüller and Olböter had been ordered to withdraw their defences to a shorter, more defensible line either side of *Kampfgruppe* Krause. The enemy followed up, with Olböter driving the Irish Guards back after serious fighting in the orchards around Château St Pierre Oursin, while Waldmüller’s new positions were attacked by the tanks of the Coldstream Guards and the infantry of the Grenadier Guards using the Vimont road as their axis. This attack was also held. The Guards complained that low cloud had kept air observation aircraft and fighter-bomber support grounded. Their war diary also claims that ‘According to PW [prisoners of war] a counter-attack by the SS was broken up by our artillery.’

During the afternoon of the 20th the expected rain clouds swept in with a vengeance and at 1600 hours the dust of the battlefield was rapidly turned into mud, which brought the fighting to an abrupt halt, with reports on both sides of tanks bogging in. It rained for forty-eight hours, precluding the resumption of the offensive for four days due to ground conditions.

Perhaps the most dramatic event of the day, however, was news of the attempt on Hitler’s life at his Wolf’s Lair headquarters in East Prussia. At first the situation was unclear, but as details came through to the *Hitlerjugend* of the bomb plot, fighting at the front, it was ‘incomprehensible’.[14] The main impact of this event on the Battle of Normandy was that in the climate of fear engendered by the Gestapo’s hunt for plotters, few commanders were now prepared to risk their lives defying Hitler’s ‘to the last round’ orders.

On the evening of the 20th the Panzer IVs of Prinz’s II Battalion were ordered forward less the panzers and crews that were not operationally ready.

Their war diary records that ‘The *Kampfgruppe* is deployed on both sides of the road west of Bellengreville in order to prevent enemy breakthrough attempts. So far, no losses. Major attack is anticipated!’



Kg Olböter’s battlefield around Émiéville. Note the orchards and the covered withdrawal route to Château St Pierre Oursin.

Operation GOODWOOD has been referred to as ‘The death ride of the British armoured divisions.’ Both sides can, however, point to successes. For the Germans, they had halted a major offensive with huge losses to the enemy, and for the British, while they had fallen short of reaching their objectives, they could argue that they had been able at the operational level to ‘dictate his [the German] deployment’, with both of I SS Panzer Corps’

panzer divisions being forced back into holding ground away from the scene of the planned Allied break-out in the US sector. Such was the Allied matériel superiority that within a week all three British armoured divisions' tank strength had been restored!

For almost two weeks the *Hitlerjugend* found themselves once again holding the front line, but this time the main enemy blows fell on the *Leibstandarte* who were positioned astride the Caen-Falaise road, which was the Allied axis south. Consequently, the division's sector was relatively 'quiet', but inevitably in tighter terrain than north of Caen and with both sides being at close quarters, the opposition's defensive positions become known and targeted. Having had several panzers damaged, as a deception measure, dummy panzers were installed near the front line during the night of 24 July. I Panzer Battalion's war diary for 25 July 1944 provides examples of routine at the front during this time and reaction to the dummies placed the previous night:

The Divisional Escort (*Begleit*) Company

German corps' and divisions' establishment included an escort company or platoon. Most divisions had them in some form, including the *Hitlerjugend*. Its role, as its name suggests, should have been to provide escorts to the division's commanders on the battlefield and to guard divisional headquarters. The company was, however, from the outset used as an additional combat sub-unit. The company's range of weapons made it a small infantry *Kampfgruppe* in its own right. The Corps Escort Company fought alongside the *Hitlerjugend*'s for most of the campaign.

At the beginning of the campaign, the Escort Company consisted of platoons of *panzergrenadiers, Panzerjäger*, light flak and recce, totalling 3 officers and 200 men. Weapons included ten light and six heavy machine guns, three *Panzerschreck*, two 81mm mortars, four self-propelled Sd.Kfz.10/4 mounting 20mm anti-aircraft guns, a 75mm Pak 40 anti-tank gun and a 75mm infantry gun. Vehicles included eight *Kübelwagens*, fourteen trucks, five Hanomag half-tracks and twenty-nine motorcycles.

By 27 June they were still at full vehicle and manpower strength, but three weeks later they were down to four heavy and six light machine guns. They still had the four flak vehicles, but all the other heavy weapons had gone! Knocked out or possibly redeployed as replacements for losses in the *panzergrenadier* regiments. The Pak 40s appear again in returns later in the battle.

Anti-aircraft gunners training to support the *panzergrenadiers* in street-fighting.

> Heavy artillery fire especially during the disengagement of the 3rd Company, the sector of which has been taken over by the 7th Company [Pz IV under command from II Battalion]. Our own aircraft are dropping bombs on our positions, though no losses have been suffered due to this. At 0900 hours enemy fighter-bombers attacked Waldmüller's front-line sector with bombs, especially the new dummy tank positions. Heavy enemy aircraft and artillery activity all day. At 2200 hours concentrated fire strike with all of our heavy weapons at Krause's front-line sector. The 3rd Company stands in the previous defensive positions of the 7th Company.

To make up for the lack of infantry, the balance of the division's artillery, plus corps assets, including elements of *Sturm Abteilung* 217,[15] returned to the division and, according to Allied reports, 'made life unpleasant for the

Guards' opposite. The pioneers also laid mines to enhance the defences. Kurt Meyer was forced to order forward the remaining companies of the *Panzerjäger* Battalion, when Wünsche's panzers were pulled back into a corps reserve, grouped with the *Leibstandarte*'s Panther and assault gun battalions. The 7th Company, the only substantial and trained company available, came forward from II Panzer Battalion to act as divisional reserve.

Panzer 837, captured on 6 July near Cheux, being recovered by a Cromwell of 11th Armoured Division Infantry Brigade workshops. It had previously been commanded by *Untersturmführer* Jeran.

Young *Hitlerjugend panzergrenadiers* waiting in cover armed with K98 rifles and an MG 42.

GOODWOOD had forced the German command to bring the LAH and *HJ* back to the front in order to contain the offensive, but they naturally wanted them back out of the line and available for counter-attacks and their own offensive purposes. The two panzer divisions would be replaced in turn by infantry formations, but the arrival of these divisions in Normandy was too little, delayed and too late! So it was that the *Hitlerjugend* wasn't fully out of the line until 4 August, having been progressively relieved by the 272nd Infantry Division. In the meantime, they would continue to hold the ground forward of Vimont.

An anecdote by Captain Tibbs, medical officer of a British parachute battalion, demonstrates the undiminished depth of indoctrination of the young *Hitlerjugend* soldiers. There was no doubt it was sharpened by the necessity of fighting an under-resourced battle in which the enemy was so clearly labouring under no such disadvantage. Tibbs, who was wounded during this

period and evacuated on a landing craft full of Allied and German casualties, recalled: ‘We landed at Portsmouth where our kindly WI [Women’s Institute] ladies, dispensing goodies, were shocked by some young SS soldiers who spat at them.’

During the fighting in Normandy in summer 1944, a revised order of battle for panzer divisions was issued and ordered to be immediately implemented because of the ongoing German manpower crisis. It aimed to make better use of support unit manpower in particular by the centralization of services, mainly supply and transport.[16] Workshop troops remained as far forward as possible, as discussed earlier. The pressure that the division was under meant that some aspects of the reorganization had to wait, but with the panzer regiment out of the line, for instance, company supply platoons were centralized at battalion level with significant savings, including in vehicles and equipment.

The first step in the journey to captivity.

With casualties having continued to mount to almost critical levels, during

this period in the line and reorganizing, 261 grenadiers were received from the SS infantry training organization, but this reinforcement of less than the equivalent of two companies was woefully inadequate. Other similarly small groups of specialists probably arrived in the division from other training organizations.

Replacement panzers and vehicles may have been few, but sixty-five dummy panzers were again set up by the I/12th Panzer Regiment during the night of 2/3 August, in an arc north and north-west of St Sylvian, indicating to the enemy reserves and a strong counter-attack force.

The Break-Out

The German army in Normandy fought hard and well to contain the Allies in their beachhead, but repeated warnings by its generals that its divisions were reaching breaking-point had been ignored, while the Allies only grew in strength. The US First Army launched Operation COBRA on 24/25 July and by the end of the month was beginning to gain momentum south, reaching Avranches. While much of the *Hitlerjugend* was still holding ground south-east of Caen, further west the British Second Army joined the offensive with Operation BLUECOAT. The moment of crisis had arrived that sucked all available forces west. These included a small *Kampfgruppe* under *Sturmbannführer* Olböter, which was extracted from Wünsche's I Panzer Corps' reserve. It consisted of a company of Panthers, a company of *panzergrenadiers* mounted in half-tracks, a battery of 105mm Wespe self-propelled guns and a pair of recce sections. They were joined by a recce company from the *Leibstandarte*. This small force was referred to as Recce Group Olböter and came under command of II SS Panzer Corps after a drive of over 40 miles to that corps' left flank near Vire.

Olböter's command was not directly involved in the first unsuccessful attempts to cut off and contain the *Hitlerjugend*'s old opponents, the British 11th Armoured Division, who were leading the offensive but fought to hold a line at the village of Chênedollé. Grenadier Winkler, a member of a section of the *panzer-grenadiers*, recalled:

We lay in the grass and among bushes under artillery fire, quite unable

to move. We had been on our way to reinforce the 9th SS; we were all that could be spared, and we felt we would be kept by the 9th to help them throughout the battle, which became very fierce. One of my comrades was hit by a shell splinter and died in my arms. This was a terrible shock to me as we had trained together in Belgium and been in the battle together since 6 June. I laid him down on the grass and I cried, but the *Rottenführer* saw me and told me to stop, but he himself was then slightly wounded and told us all to run off to better cover. He crawled after us but was then killed by a bullet before reaching us. Then an *Obergrenadier* directed us to set up our machine gun and we drove back the advancing British.

When it got dark, we heard a lot of movement and thought we would be surrounded. We could see nothing so one of the men shot off the only flare we had, but when it burst, and we stared down the hill we could see nothing at all. So, some of us fell asleep from exhaustion while the others tried to keep watch. We had no idea what was going on and were without orders. Then, as it got light, the first bombers arrived, and we suffered the worst air-raid yet. We had dug holes, but they were quite unprotected from the fragmentation bombs that burst above and about us, and two more lads were killed. We were very exposed, so the senior grenadier told us we must go further round the hill, and as soon as the last bombers left we did that and on the way met a patrol of the 9th SS who sent us in the right direction. We found an artillery position where we were able to get some coffee and a little to eat. Then an officer sent us off with an *Unterscharführer* and we were back in the battle again.

The 105mm Wespe self-propelled gun was deployed in two batteries in the Artillery Regiment's III Battalion.

Olböter's men were still covering the left flank in a bitter battle for the village of Chênedollé and became the first soldiers of the division to encounter American troops that probed eastward out of Vire. The Recce Group was still fighting with II SS Panzer Corps when the next heavy Allied blow fell south of Caen.

Obersturmbannführer Wilhelm Mohnke and *Sturmbannführer* Hans Waldmüller with a wounded *HJ* soldier.

Chapter Eight

Operation TOTALIZE

With the US break-out presenting a long flank, as the Third US Army spilled out into Brittany and the US First Army rolled south to Rennes and east to Le Mans, Hitler ordered Operation LÜTTICH: a counter-attack against the Americans at Mortain. Using all available panzer formations, the aim was simple: to reach the sea and cut the enemy's line of communication south to Avranches. Again, the generals protested but Hitler insisted and so, one by one, the panzer divisions, including the *Leibstandarte*, headed off on the 60-mile march west. The *Hitlerjugend* had only two days earlier been completely replaced by the 272nd Infantry Division in the line and were preparing to follow the other divisions to the west, starting on the night of 7/8 August.

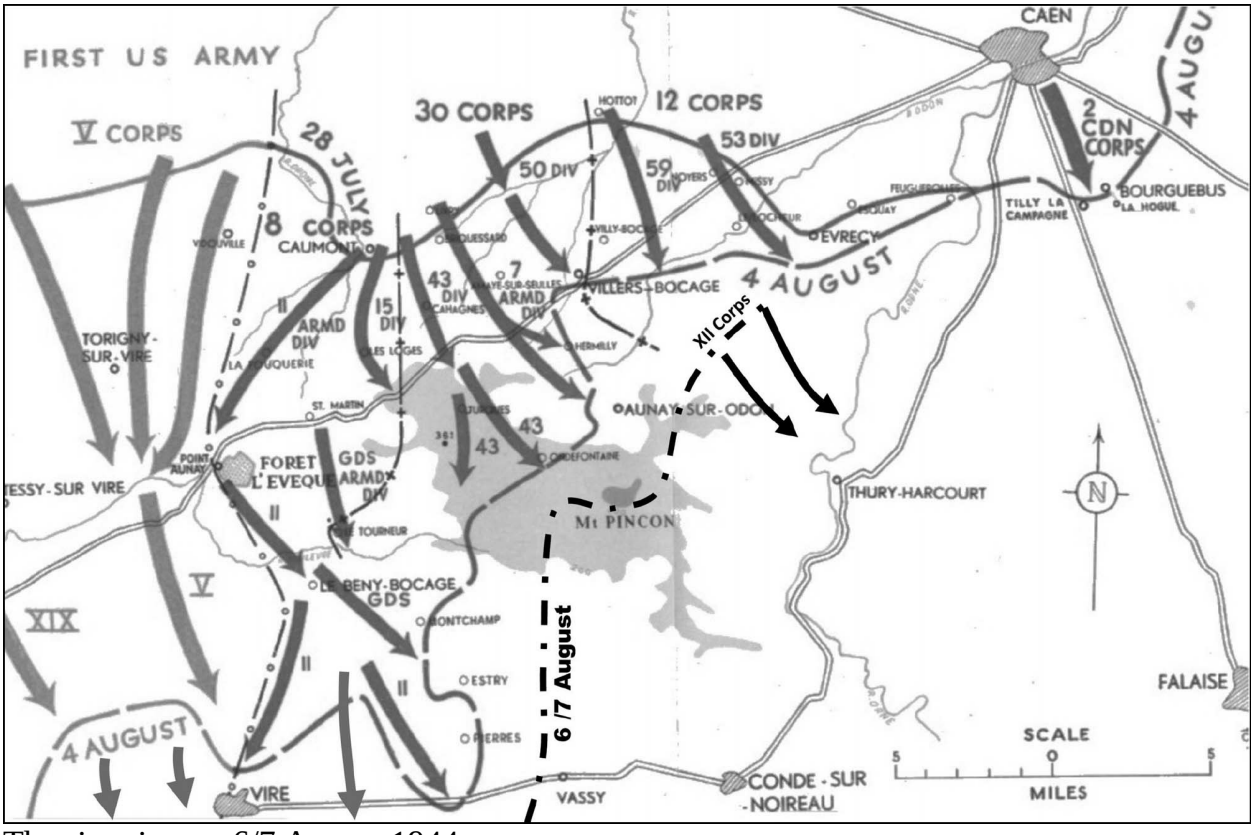
General Harry Crerar and the now-activated First Canadian Army that night launched the next major Allied offensive, Operation TOTALIZE. The attack, to be led by Lieutenant General Guy Simmons' Headquarters II Canadian Corps, was both tactically and technically innovative and was based on a need to avoid yet more heavy casualties in a conventional daylight attack.

The leading battle groups of the 2nd Canadian Infantry and 51st Highland divisions were to be mounted in armoured personnel carriers (APCs), which had been produced by removing guns and racking from seventy-two self-propelled Priests. The plan was that armoured columns of tanks and APCs were to penetrate the German defensive zone to a depth of 5 miles, bypassing centres of resistance which would be taken by battle groups following on foot. The whole aim was to penetrate and unhinge the defences of the 89th Infantry Division[1] and then exploit south towards Falaise using the N158 as

the axis, with Polish and Canadian armoured divisions.[2]

Across the Second Army hopes ran high that the Canadians' success on 8 August 1944 would be as great as that at Amiens on the same date in 1918, but well-positioned and ready to intervene were the *Hitlerjugend*! If the Canadians had attacked six hours later, with the *HJ* having headed west, the history of the latter part of the Battle of Normandy could have been very different, but such are the fortunes of war.

A preliminary operation, designed to unbalance the German defence, was mounted by the British XII Corps on the night of 6/7 August, with two infantry divisions, plus armour, advancing south towards Thury-Harcourt. Consequently, I SS Panzer Corps' reserve, *Kampfgruppe* Wünsche, was committed to battle in the Forêt de Grimbosq. Wünsche's *Kampfgruppe* now consisted of a company each of Tigers, Panthers and Panzer IVs, plus the remnants of I and II 26 Panzer Grenadiers and Olböter's III//26th SS *Panzergrenadiers*. The latter battalion, of course, without *Sturmbannführer* Olböter and one *panzergrenadier* company.



The situation on 6/7 August 1944.

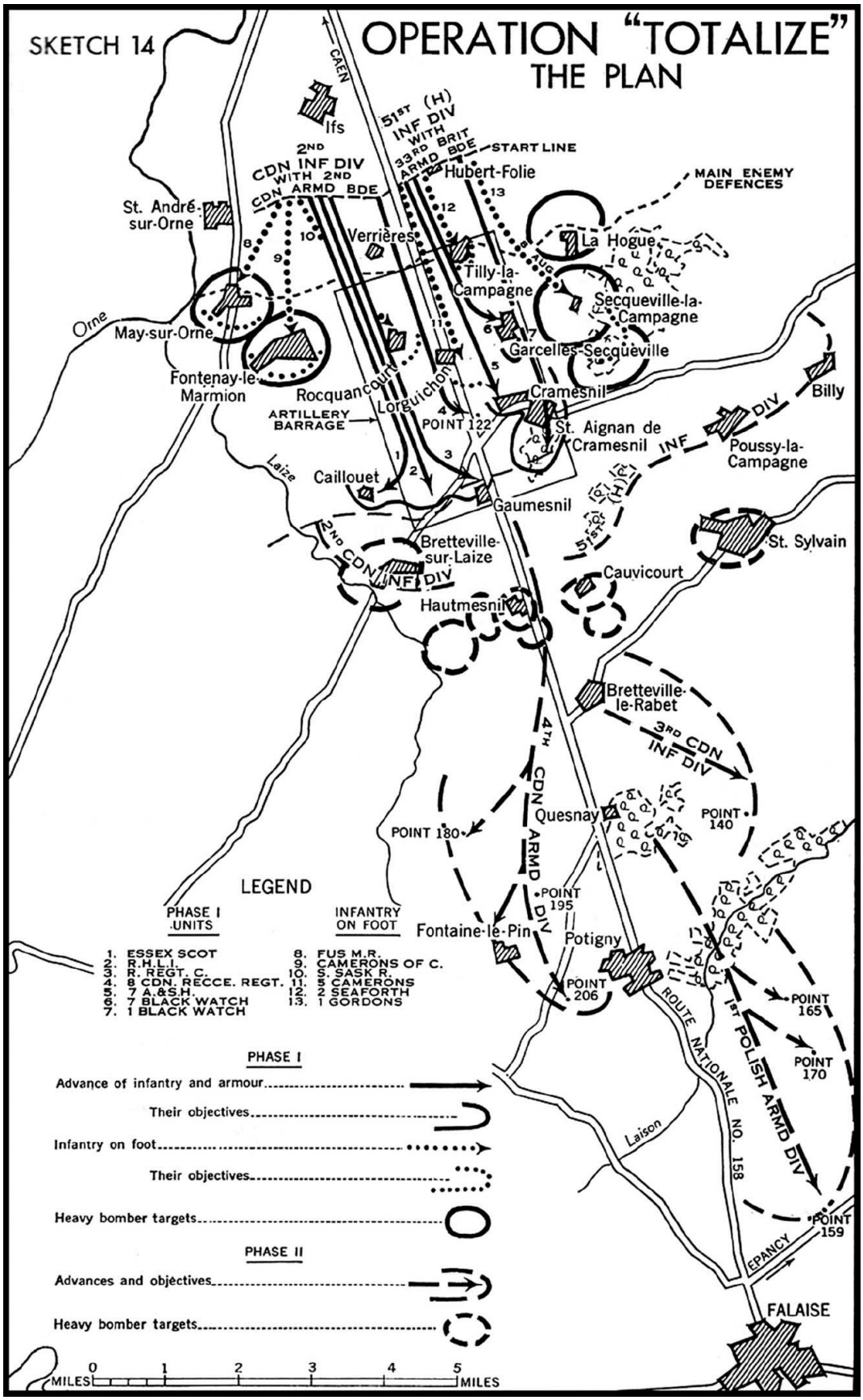
At 0430 hours on 7 August *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller was ready for action in the Forêt de Grimbosq area, attempting to eliminate a British bridgehead on the Orne. *Sturmmann* Erich Bissor was with them and recalled that

> The next morning, British tanks attacked our HQ from the north-west. The attack was repelled without any losses at our side. Two British tanks were extremely unlucky. Trying to get cover behind a farm, they became stuck in a cesspool. The crews abandoned their tanks and took off. We used the opportunity to get some extra rations which the crews had obviously left. In the meantime, one of our officers, *Hauptsturmführer* Schlau, fooled the enemy by using their own radio and reported a larger number of tanks than we actually had.

Kampfgruppe Wünsche was still around Grimbosq when the Allied offensive opened.

That evening *Unterscharführer* Freiberg was instructed to recover a Panther commanded by *Unterscharführer* Pitche which had become stuck in a bomb crater. He recalled that ‘This whole action happened under a terrible air attack. Hirschmann, the recovery vehicle driver, received his commands by a string around each arm to tell him in the dark to go left or right.’[3]

Unterscharführer Pitche in his battle-damaged Panther 318 during the *Rückmarsch* (German retreat) across northern France at the end of the battle.


SKETCH 14
OPERATION "TOTALIZE"
THE PLAN
CAEN
Ifs
51ST (H) INF DIV WITH 33RD BRIT ARMD BDE
START LINE
2ND CDN INF DIV WITH 2ND CDN ARMD BDE
Hubert-Folie
MAIN ENEMY DEFENCES
St. André-sur-Orne
Verrières
La Hogue
Tilly-la-Campagne
Secqueville-la-Campagne
Orne
May-sur-Orne
Garcelles-Secqueville
Fontenay-le-Marmion
Rocquancourt
Lorguichon
Cramesnil
ARTILLERY BARRAGE
POINT 122
St. Aignan de Cramesnil
Billy
Poussy-la-Campagne
Laize
Caillouet
Gaumesnil
Bretteville-sur-Laize
St. Sylvain
Cauvicourt
Hautmesnil
Bretteville-le-Rabet
3RD CDN INF DIV
4TH CDN ARMD DIV
Quesnay
POINT 140
POINT 180
POINT 195
Fontaine-le-Pin
Potigny
POINT 206
POINT 165
POINT 170
1ST POLISH ARMD DIV
ROUTE NATIONALE NO. 158
Laison
POINT 159
EPANCY
FALAISE
LEGEND
PHASE I UNITS
1. ESSEX SCOT
2. R.H.L.I.
3. R. REGT. C.
4. 8 CDN. RECCE. REGT.
5. 7 A.&S.H.
6. 7 BLACK WATCH
7. 1 BLACK WATCH
8. FUS M.R.
9. CAMERONS OF C.
10. S. SASK R.
11. 5 CAMERONS
12. 2 SEAFORTH
13. 1 GORDONS
INFANTRY ON FOOT
PHASE I
Advance of infantry and armour
Their objectives
Infantry on foot
Their objectives
Heavy bomber targets
PHASE II
Advances and objectives
Heavy bomber targets
0 1 2 3 4 5
MILES
MILES

The TOTALIZE plan.

Grimbosq was a relatively small action, but the losses of tank crews and Panthers was significant. The 3rd Company was for the time being reduced to being barely effective at a crucial moment in the campaign.

The First Allied Bomber Strike

As had become customary, the main Allied attack began with a strike by RAF Bomber Command: 641 aircraft dropped 3,458 tons of high explosive on the flanks of the advance for the loss of 10 aircraft to flak over the battlefield during their bombing runs. The final 200 aircraft could not drop their bombs due to a lack of wind, which meant that the targets were obscured by banks of dust and smoke. The sound of the aircraft was the first notice that the division had that another offensive had begun. At his divisional command post east of Potigny,[4] *Standartenführer* Kurt 'Panzer' Meyer wrote that he heard 'A continuous booming and rumbling north of Bretteville that announced the anticipated Allied offensive shortly before midnight. Air attacks hammered the positions of the 89th Infantry Division and created a fiery glow in the sky. The front was on fire!'

With the aid of SS liaison officers with the forward divisions, as usual the German reaction was swift; in fact so swift that the leading elements of the *Hitlerjugend* were on the move back to the front before the Allies had crossed their start lines. Kurt Meyer continued:

> The first bombs automatically tripped the alarm for the units. Reconnaissance units moved north and tried to contact the engaged regiments of the 89th Infantry Division. Hour after hour passed in gloomy expectation of the coming day. The giant hammer blows of the enemy bombers told us more than any mortal could and the drumming of the bombs and shells focused our attention. There was no point in wanting to escape this hellfire; its throat had already opened to swallow us.

Brigadeführer Krämer at I SS Panzer Corps immediately sought to have the *Hitlerjugend*'s march west that evening to LÜTTICH cancelled. It was

readily apparent, despite communication difficulties and the abrupt change of Allied tactics to a night assault, that this was a major attack and that the 89th Division was in trouble. Despite failure of communication to the divisions in the line, planning at divisional headquarters swung into action and Meyer was able to issue his orders as soon as the Allied attack was confirmed.

Kampfgruppe Waldmüller was to disengage around Grimbosq and move to occupy positions in order to block the advance south along the axis of the Caen-Falaise road and Olböter was given a warning order that he would probably have to return with his *Kampfgruppe* to the division and be prepared to launch a counter-attack with Waldmüller.

The Allies crossed their start line, the Grentheville/Hubert-Folie/St André road, at 2330 hours, ten minutes before the final bombs dropped. They advanced, slowly to start with, speeding up to 5mph. Leaving just minutes for the bombers to get clear, the massed Allied artillery began its fire plan at 2343 hours.

SS *Brigadeführer* Fritz Krämer, Chief of Staff I SS Panzer Corps.

Oberführer Meyer was on the road north at around 0200 hours and

recorded:

> I raced towards Bretteville with some dispatch riders before daylight to obtain an overview of the previous night's events … I talked to Mohnke[5] in Urville and received the first reports on the night's events. The positions of the 89th Infantry Division had been overrun; the division was as good as destroyed. Only a few individual strongpoints were still intact; they were like islands in the stream of battle, giving the attacking Canadians a hot reception time and again.
>
> There were no communications whatsoever with the units at the front and the surviving pockets of resistance fought on independently. There was no cohesion to the defence; they had to rely on their own resources.

As he drove forward in the early hours of 8 August, Meyer knew exactly where he was:

> A lucky coincidence was that I knew the terrain in great detail. I had been there with my old [*Leibstandarte*] reconnaissance battalion in the autumn of 1942, and we had conducted plenty of exercises. I knew, therefore, that the high ground at Potigny dominated the terrain and the Laison sector was a natural tank obstacle. The Canadian attack had to be halted north of Potigny or the fate of the 7th and 15th Armies would have been sealed.

As Meyer reached the front, he could see how serious the situation was for himself:

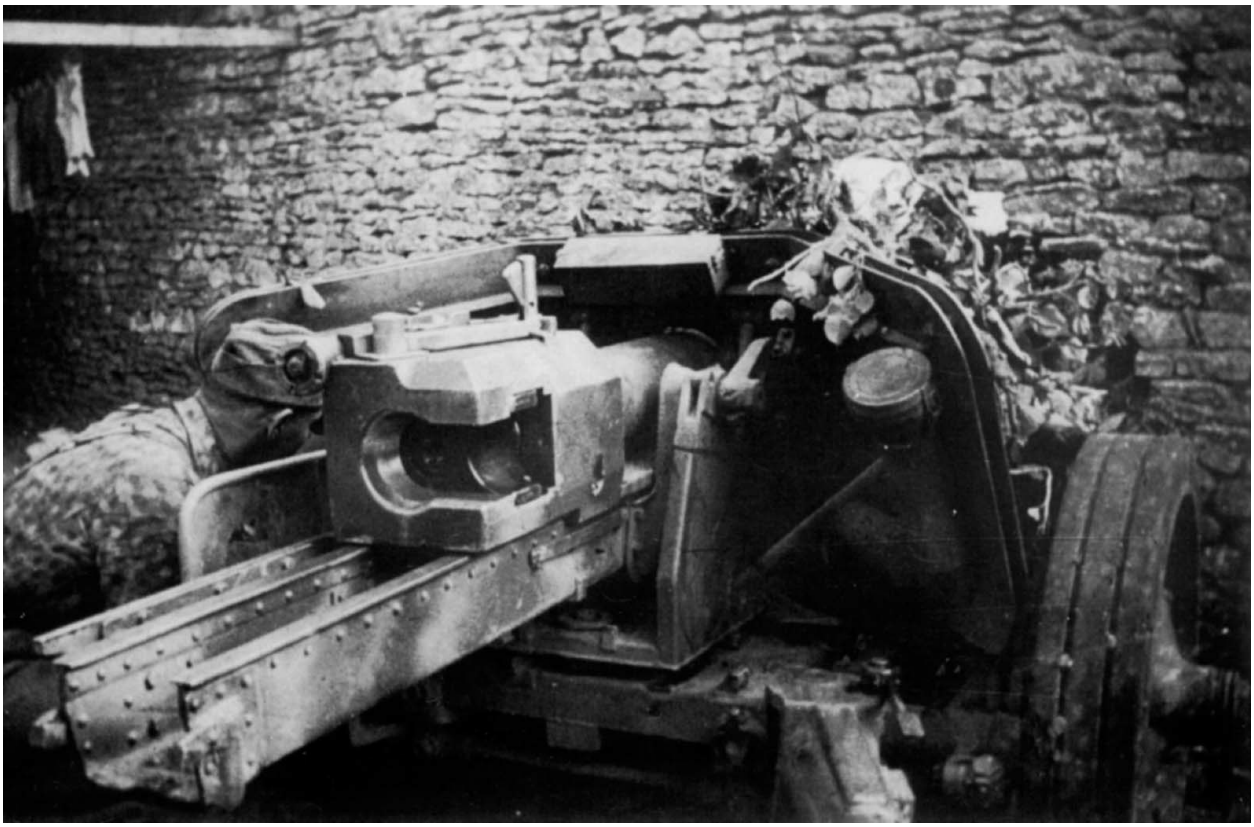
> Bretteville was impassable. The bombs had blocked the streets with rubble. We moved across open fields to try to reach Cintheaux that way … I found a platoon of *Panzerjäger* from *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller at Cintheaux. With foresight, Waldmüller had already moved the platoon there during the night. The place was under artillery fire.

This platoon of 75mm Pak 40 anti-tank guns was a part of the towed company of SS *Panzerjäger* Battalion 12 which had marched forward overnight.

Meanwhile, despite the darkness and dust, which reduced the effectiveness

of ‘Monty’s Moonlight’,[6] the Highland and Canadian armoured columns advanced past the 89th Infantry Division’s strongpoints in the villages and woods. The new radio guidance system was only partly successful: there were accidents, some vehicles got lost and parts of columns became detached; nonetheless, by dawn most of the Allied infantry were at their debussing points 3 miles behind the German front lines. The Highland Division seized the villages of Cramesnil and Saint-Aignan-de-Cramesnil, where the Scottish battalion advancing against this latter village had been engaged by the 1st Company of the *Panzerjäger* Battalion, which already deployed forward supporting the 272nd Division just to the east of the advance. Their fire on Allied armour amid the darkness and dust had, however, not stopped the Shermans. Meanwhile, the Canadians had secured Point 122 near the point that the Caen-Falaise road crosses a ridge line, but further west they had failed to secure the ridge due to a combination of disorientation and German resistance.

A Canadian battalion, the Royal Highland Light Infantry, were in difficulty: by the time they had collected missing elements of the battalion and the infantry had dismounted, it was getting light. Their objective, a quarry on the ridge, lay some 800 yards ahead but the volume of increasingly accurate small-arms, mortar and anti-tank fire was growing. A Canadian report recorded that ‘… they were unable to advance to their objective. The enemy had four tanks and a self-propelled gun firmly established in the nearby quarry. The force therefore dug in as far forward as possible and prepared to defend themselves against counter-attack.’



A 75mm Pak 40 positioned to fire through a loop-holed Norman stone wall.

These ‘tanks’ were almost certainly *Panzerjäger* IV from the 2nd Company of the *Panzerjäger* Battalion. Having again conferred with I SS Panzer Corps, at 0400 hours *Sturmbannführer* Hubert Meyer ordered *Sturmbannführer* Günther Wöst to motor forward with his two remaining companies to support the 89th Division and to join the 1st Company. On their arrival at the front just before first light, they were deployed alongside the Wehrmacht Division, with the self-propelled 2nd Company on the ridge and the towed 3rd Company astride the Caen-Falaise road but south of Point 122, which was in Canadian hands.

Sturmbannführer Günther Wöst, commander of the *Panzerjäger* Battalion.

Further to the west the Germans still held the village of Caillouet, the

objective of the Essex Scots, but dawn revealed that they were 2,000 yards short of it and with the 89th Division's infantry there now supported by a platoon of the *HJ*'s *Panzerjäger*, it would be a hard nut to crack and buy time for the rest of the division to arrive.

By 0830 hours the *Hitlerjugend*'s artillery was coming into action, firing in support of the immediate counter-attacks being launched by German infantry to recapture their positions. Reports by Canadians on the ridge beyond Point 122 adjacent to the Caen-Falaise road indicate that elements of *Kampfgruppe* Wünsche had already come across from Grimbosq. They saw four panzers, two Panthers and probably a pair of Mk IVs, leading grenadiers of the 89th, coming in their direction. From beyond Cramesnil more *Hitlerjugend* panzers opened fire on the Canadians on the ridge. The war diary of the Royal Regiment of Canada reads:

> At approx 0830 hrs, the enemy counter-attacked with tanks. Panther tanks moved up the CAEN-FALAISE Highway, and we were also fired on by tanks from the far side of CRAMESNIL. One Panther tank penetrated our positions and approached within about 25 yds of Bn HQ. Heavy casualties, both in personnel and vehicles, were suffered by the fire of MMGs [Medium Machine Guns] attached to the Bn. Our 3@ Mortar Pln also suffered heavily, losing four carriers complete with ammunition that were burned out and two mortars. Three mortarmen were wounded. One of our SP A/Tk guns was brewed.

German soldiers inspecting a knocked-out M10 Achilles Tank Destroyer.

The counter-attacks were not successful, as the Allies had brought up their antitank guns and artillery observers. They brought down a heavy fire which broke up the attacks and the 89th Division was soon beginning to collapse.

As they marched forward, the *Hitlerjugend* encountered increasing numbers of Wehrmacht soldiers heading to the rear. Kurt Meyer described the scene as he drove out of the village and on a short distance to the main road:

> I couldn't believe my eyes. Groups of German soldiers were running south in panic down both sides of the Caen-Falaise road. I was seeing German soldiers running away for the first time during those long, gruesome years of genocide. They were unresponsive. They had been through hellfire and stumbled past us with fear-filled eyes. I looked at the leaderless groups in fascination. My uniform stuck to my body; the heavy burden of responsibility made me break out in a sweat. I suddenly realized that the fate of Falaise and the safety of both armies depended on my decision.

I stood up in the Volkswagen and moved in the direction of Caen. More and more confused soldiers approached me fleeing southwards. I vainly try to stabilize the collapsing front. The appalling bombardment had unnerved the units of the 89th Infantry Division. Rounds landed on the road, sweeping it empty. The retreat could only continue off to the sides of the road. I jumped out of the car and was alone in the middle of the road.

I slowly approached the front and addressed the fleeing soldiers. They were startled and stopped. They looked at me incredulously, wondering how I could stand on the road armed with just a Schmeisser. The young soldiers probably thought I had cracked. But then they recognized me, turned around, and waved to their comrades to come and organize the defence around Cintheaux. The place had to be held at all costs to gain time for the *Kampfgruppen*; speed was imperative.

Counter-Stroke: 8 August 1944

'Panzer' Meyer, having seen the situation at the front for himself, drove back to Bretteville to organize the main counter-stroke:

While with Mohnke, I saw the commander-in-chief of the 5th Panzer Army, *General der Panzertruppen* Eberbach. The general had come to see for himself the effects of the earlier Allied attacks and make decisions based on personal observation. The commander-in-chief gave me full freedom of action and agreed with my estimate of the situation.

The plan Meyer made based on this estimate was as follows:

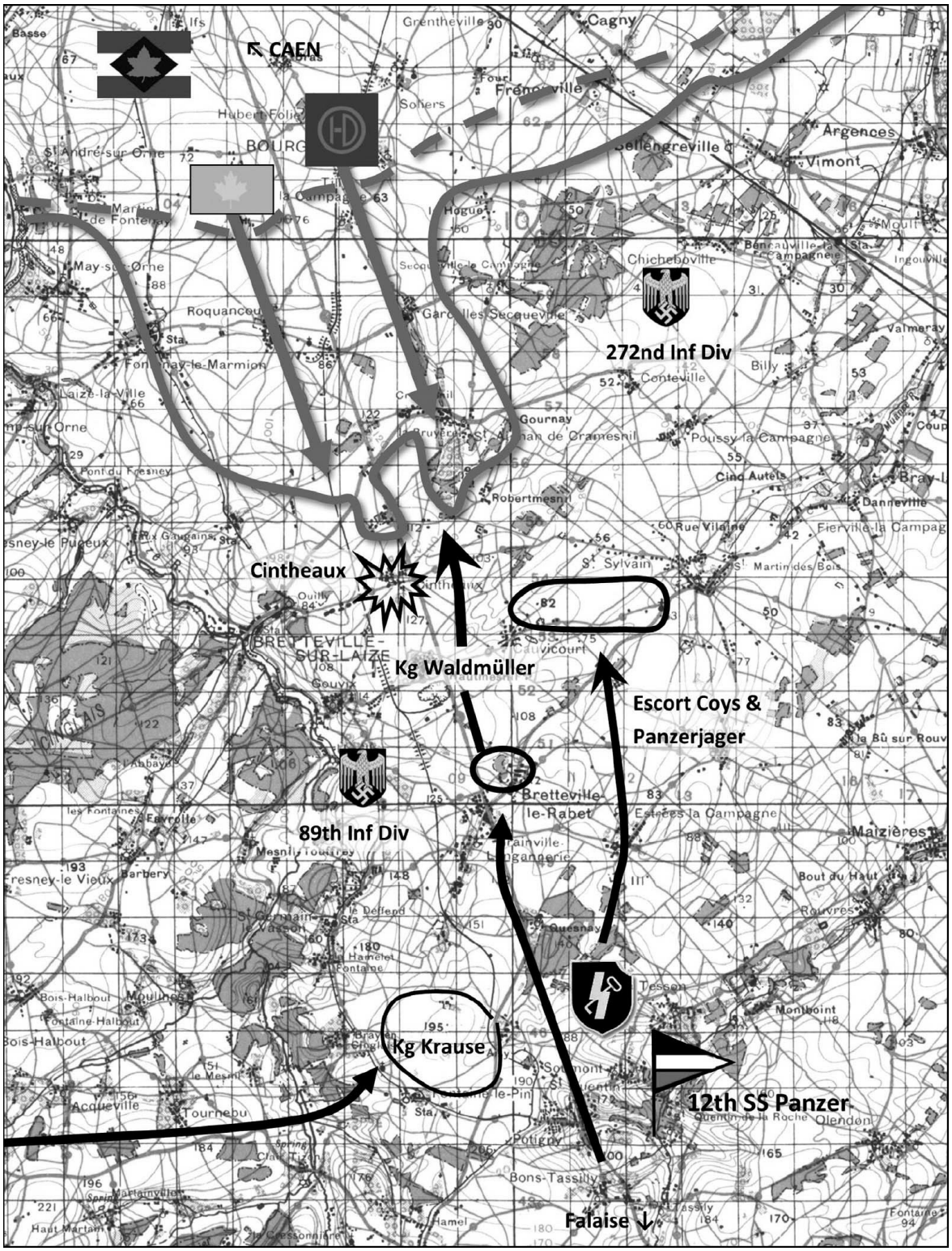
I decided to defend Cintheaux with those forces already employed and to launch an attack east of the road with lightning speed and all available units. By doing that, I hoped to disrupt the enemy's intent. I designated the woods south-east of Garcelles as the objective. Because a large quarry made a tank attack south of Cintheaux unlikely, I had no fears there. We had to risk the attack to gain time for the Laison sector. The attack was planned to start at 1230 hours [1330 Allied time].

It is worth noting that with the disparity of forces, Meyer had at an early

stage appreciated that he could only disrupt the next phase of the battle that would surely see the use of Allied armour, rather than restoring the *Hauptkampflinie* (main battle line).

Back in the woods and farm buildings just to the east of Potigny, *Sturmbannführer* Hubert Meyer, the chief of staff, had the *Hitlerjugend*'s divisional staff working on assembling the division, producing orders for the counter-attack and a new defensive line on the high ground north of the River Laison.[7] He had anticipated Kurt Meyer's intention, who recorded that 'In the meantime, Hubert Meyer had directed *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller to Bretteville-le-Rabet. From there it could be employed based on the situation.' Meanwhile in Bretteville-sur-Laize the divisional commander penned a message with the broad outline of his plan, which was sent the 9 miles back to his headquarters by dispatch rider. He later wrote that his outline plan was as follows:

1. *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller, reinforced by I/SS-Panzer-Regiment 12 and the remnants of the 101st Heavy Panzer Battalion, is to counter-attack to seize the high ground south of St Aignan.



The situation mid-morning and *Standartenführer* Meyer's plan.

2. Divisional Escort Company, reinforced by the 12th SS *Panzerjäger* Battalion is to advance through Estrées and secure the high ground west of St Sylvain.[8]

3. *Kampfgruppe* Krause, reinforced by II/SS-Panzer-Regiment 12, disengage from the enemy, occupies the high ground west of Potigny and defends the area between the Laison and Laize.
4. Divisional command post at Potigny; I will be with *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller.

His plan made and being put into effect by Divisional Headquarters, Kurt Meyer

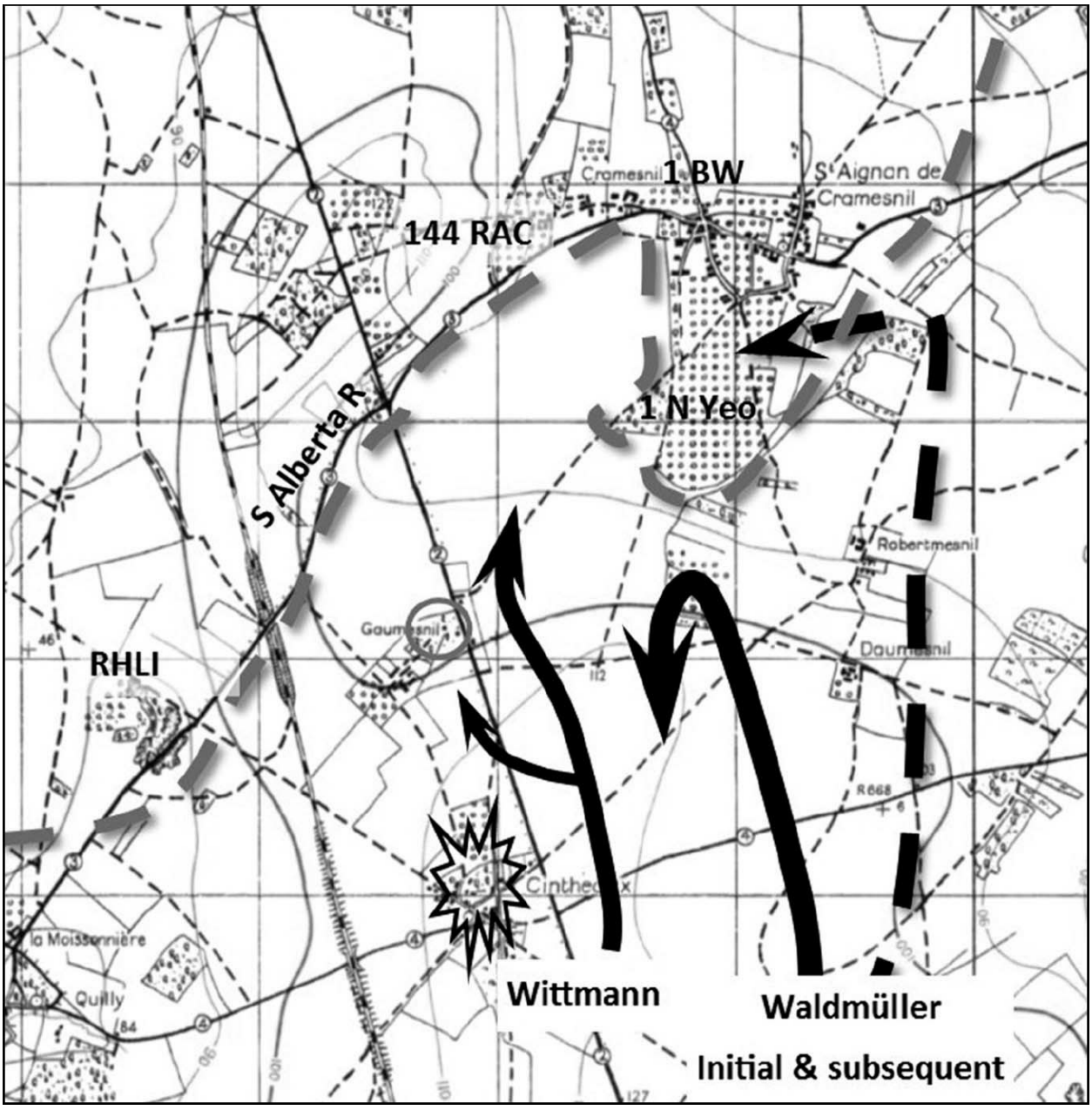
> … met Waldmüller north of Bretteville-le-Rabet. Together we drove to Cintheaux to determine the present situation. Wittmann's Tigers were already in position in cover of a hedge east of Cintheaux without having taken part in the fire-fight so far. Cintheaux was under artillery fire while the open terrain was fairly free of fire. From the northern edge of the village we spotted massive tank columns north of the road to Bretteville-sur-Laize. The tanks were assembled in packs. The same picture offered itself south of Garcelles and at the edge of the forest south-east of the village. Seeing these concentrations of tanks almost took our breath away. We could not comprehend the behaviour of the Canadians. Why did those overwhelming tank forces not push on their attack?
>
> Waldmüller and I agreed that we could not let the enemy tank units start out against us. They must not be allowed to launch another attack. An enemy tank division sat attack-ready on either side of the road. That attack could not be allowed to get started – we must attempt to grasp the initiative.

Sturmbannführer Waldmüller giving orders during the Normandy campaign.

The division had been granted the time they needed to carry out the battle procedure necessary to bring them into action!

Just before midday *Standartenführer* Meyer had taken his commanders forward to the edge of Cintheaux to look out over the open ground across which they were going to attack towards the nearby hamlet of Gaumesnil, the orchards south of St Aignan, the village of Cramesnil and the high ground of Point 122. They retired to the small market square to coordinate and as Meyer wrote:

> During the final briefing with Waldmüller and Wittmann[9] we watched a single bomber approaching. It flew across the terrain several times and then set a visual marker. The bomber appeared to us to be some sort of airborne command post. I immediately ordered the attack so that the troops would be out of the bombing sector. Once more I shook Michael Wittmann's hand and mentioned the extremely critical situation. Our good Michael laughed his boyish laughter and climbed into his Tiger.



The *Hitlerjugend*'s counter-attacks.

By now they knew exactly what the arrival overhead of the American master bomber's aircraft meant: a second bomber strike preceding the advance of the Allied armoured divisions. They had to get forward and into action before the main force of 8th USAAF bombers, which would only be twenty minutes or so behind their bombing assembly areas.

The aim of the attack was simply to get to grips with the Allies who were holding the ridge, Point 112 and the villages and in a close-quarter battle

seize the initiative and inflict disruption and delay the enemy division's assembly for the next phase of TOTALIZE. The main part of *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller, with 200 *panzergrenadiers*, twenty MkIV tanks and ten *jagdpanzers*, was to attack on the right through St Aignan, while *Hauptsturmführer* Wittmann with the eight to ten Tigers of the 101st Heavy Panzer Battalion, reinforced by the four *Brummbä*, was to attack west of the Caen-Falaise road, astride the hamlet of Gaumesnil.

Attack of *Kampfgruppe* Wittmann

The British noticed that 'At approximately 1200 the shelling and mortaring increased in intensity' and the 1st Northamptonshire Yeomanry's (1 N Yeo's) war diary recorded '1220 Tigers (VI) reported moving towards A Sqn.' The counterattack had begun. Kurt Meyer decided not to go with Waldmüller but to remain in Cintheaux near the Caen-Falaise road.

A Canadian gunnery officer watching the attack develop from the high ground around Point 122 saw the panzers head north across the fields. He was '… astonished at the cool arrogance of the German tank commanders, standing up exposed in their turrets, looking for targets through their binoculars, their guns traversing all the time.'

A Tiger belonging to 101 *Schwere Panzerabteilung* ready to go into action.

First into action were the Tigers. As already recorded, they were in cover of the hedgerows south-east of Cintheaux and therefore further forward than the rest of *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller, which was assembling further back in the dead ground of Le Petit Val, between Cauvicourt and the Cintheaux-St Sylvian road. From his observation post Kurt Meyer witnessed the attack:

> They [the Tigers] cross open terrain at high speed and make use of small dips in the land for their fire-fights … I am standing at the northern edge of Cintheaux while enemy artillery aims destructive fire at the attacking panzers. The Tiger of Michael Wittmann races into the enemy fire. I know his tactics during such situations, it is called: Straight ahead! Never stop! Get through and gain an open field of fire!

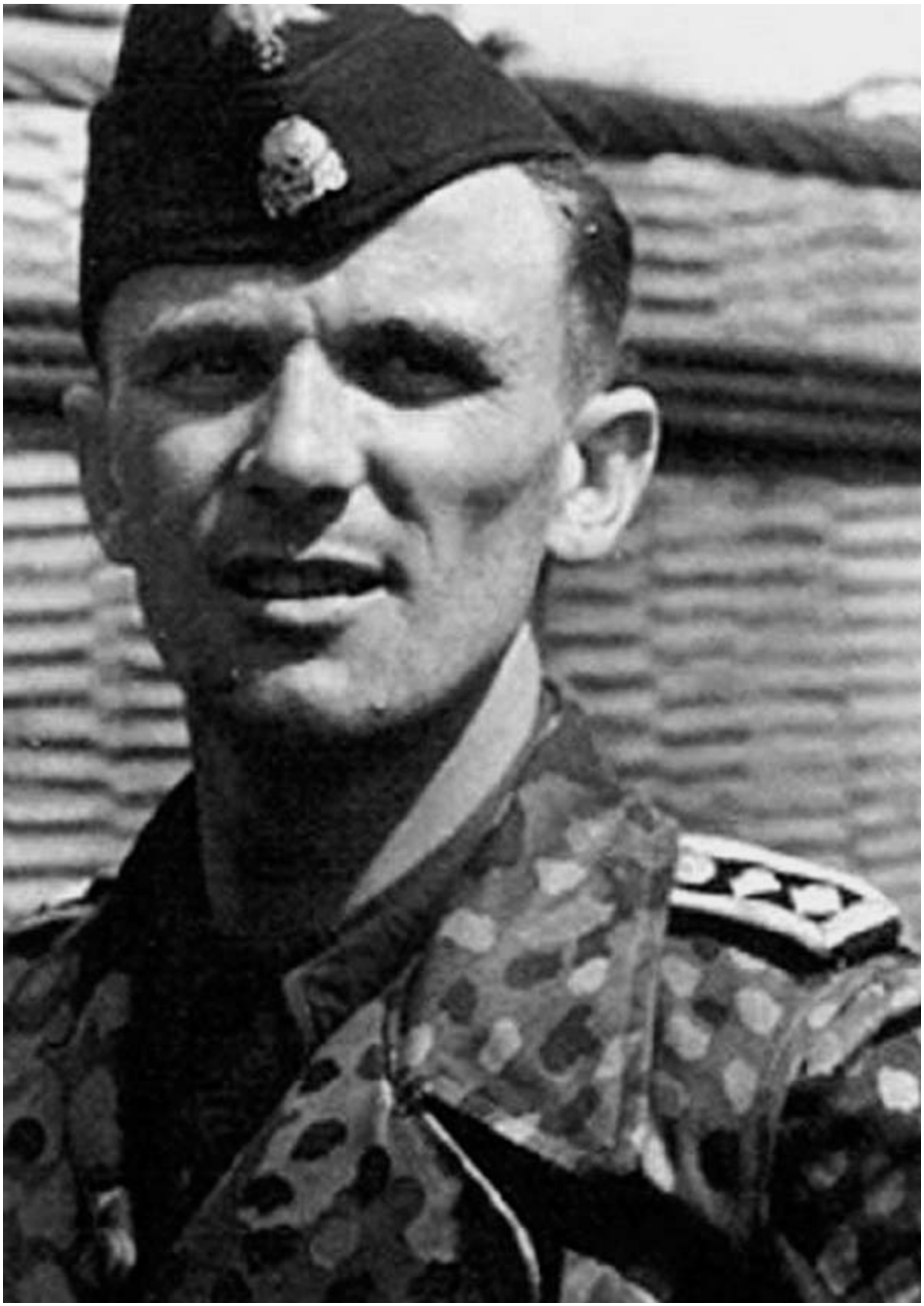
Wittmann led five Tigers on an axis advance 150 yards east of the Caen-Falaise road heading towards Cramesnil, followed by a weak company of *panzergrenadiers*. His panzers were deployed one behind the other so as to minimize the target presented to Allied anti-tank gunners from head-on. The further he advanced, however, the less useful this tactic became as to the left in Gaumesnil were the predominantly 75mm-armed Shermans of A Squadron, Sherbrooke Fusiliers and to his right, 1 N Yeo in the orchard and Triangular Wood south of St Aignan. Wittmann was, in effect, leading his men into a classic fire pocket or ‘killing area’.

This poses a question: had he and Kurt Meyer not spotted either of these threats during the recce from the edge of Cintheaux? It is probable that at a distance of nearly a mile 1 N Yeo in the cover of the orchard could not have been seen, but at only 700 yards it is unlikely that they, their *Panzerjäger* crews and the 89th Division’s infantry would not have seen the Sherbrooke Fusiliers’ tanks arriving in Gaumesnil. Breaking down of the high wall on the south edge of the hamlet to Sherman gun-barrel height must have been obvious. It is therefore likely that the pair of Tigers and *Brummbä* advancing to the west of the road were to deal with the Gaumesnil threat head-on.

The Gaumesnil château wall where A Squadron gathered has been rebuilt back to its original height.

The primary arc of fire of the Sherman was south across some 700 yards of open country to the northern outskirts of Cintheaux. From around that village and out of the dead ground came the Tigers and *Brummbä*, which presented the greatest threat to them. *Hauptscharführer* Hans Höflinger, commanding a Tiger, was heading straight for Gaumesnil and described the early course of the attack:

> Then we drove off, Michel [*sic*] right of the road and I left, four others with Michel and the brother of Heinz von Westernhagen with me. Approximately 800 yards to Michel's right there was a small wood which struck us as suspicious and which was to prove fateful to us.



Hauptscharführer Hans Höflinger.

As the Tigers approached his position, the Canadian commander was using his radio to keep his squadron firmly under control:

> I just kept yelling, 'Hold off! Hold off!' until they got reasonably close. We opened fire at 500 yards. The lead tank, the one nearest the road was knocked out. Behind it were a couple of SPs [*Brummbä*]. I personally got one of the SPs right on the Caen-Falaise road.

Höflinger was commanding the Tiger knocked out immediately south of Gaumesnil. He recalled:

> We began taking heavy fire from anti-tank guns once again. Then my panzer received a frightful blow and I had to order my crew to get out as it had already begun to burn fiercely. My crew and I dashed toward the rear and got through.

Several of the Sherbrookes' Fireflies joined the battle, having come down onto the forward slope of Point 122 around La Jalousie when the attack began, but at this stage of the action they were at more than 1,000 yards range against the frontal armour of their targets.

Waiting in an orchard adjacent to the 'Triangular Wood' that had so worried Höflinger were the Shermans of the Northamptonshire Yeomanry's A Squadron, but the only tank covering the open ground was a Firefly named Velkliye Luki commanded by Sergeant Gordon. His gunner Trooper Joe Ekins recalled:

> We saw them coming and I was the only one who could do anything about it; the 75mms would have to be within 300 yards to do anything to a Tiger. Sergeant Gordon, our tank commander said to us 'Wait until they are about 800 yards.' So, we waited and then he pulled us forward out of the orchard. You need to get out of the trees to traverse the gun. 'Target the last Tiger.' There were four coming across in line ahead. It was something we had learnt, fire at the last tank. Gordon said, 'Fire when ready', which I did and immediately the loader loads another one and I fired again at the same target. I think I hit with both and he started

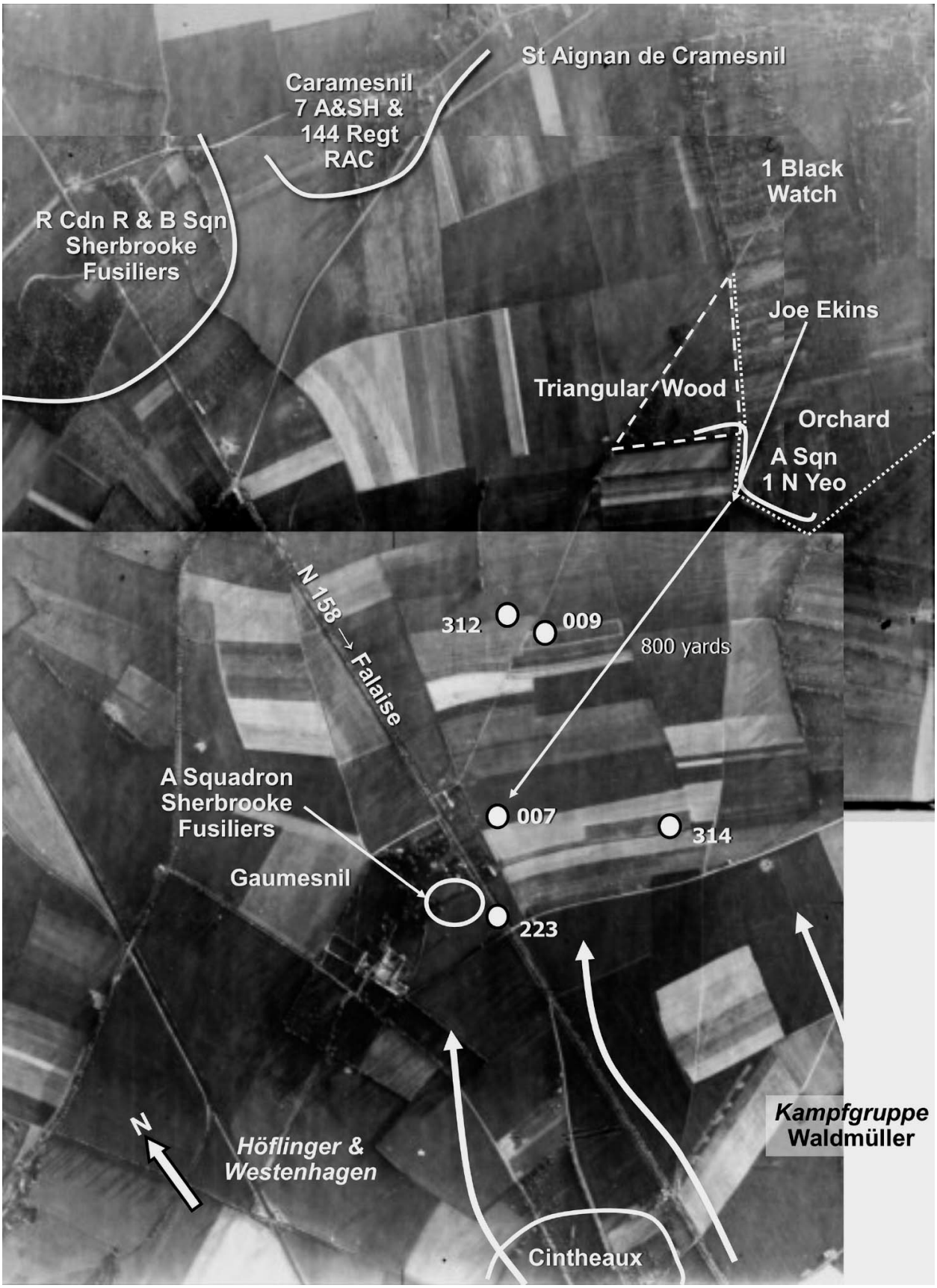
> to smoke. Sergeant Gordon immediately said, ‘Reverse back into cover’ and I could see the gun of the second Tiger starting to traverse around towards us. He had obviously seen us and fired at us as we reversed back into cover. Either the shell hit the turret lid, or he was hit by a branch of a tree because Sergeant Gordon was knocked out.[10]

An officer took over command of Velkliye Luki

> and ordered ‘Driver advance.’ So we pulled out of the orchard again and I fired at the second tank. His gun was still pointing at us. We fired one round and he blew up; we must have hit his ammunition. We pulled back into the orchard …

According to Höflinger, ‘Michel called [on the radio], “Attention, attention, Pak from the right. Pull back …” but didn’t complete the message. When I looked out to the right, I saw that Michel’s tank wasn’t moving. I called him by radio but received no answer.’ A member of the crew of a Tiger who was out of his panzer and on his feet was a witness to the shot that knocked out Wittmann’s Tiger: ‘We had already been hit and forced out of the burning Tiger into the crops. I saw the wake of a shell going through the barley and it hit *Hauptsturmführer* Wittmann’s tank. It came from the right.’[11]

Wittmann’s Tiger 007 with its turret displaced by the internal explosion and by being moved to remove the tracks.


St Aignan de Cramesnil
Caramesnil
7 A&SH &
144 Regt
RAC
1 Black
Watch
R Cdn R & B Sqn
Sherbrooke
Fusiliers
Joe Ekins
Triangular Wood
Orchard
A Sqn
1 N Yeo
N 158 → Falaise
312
009
800 yards
A Squadron
Sherbrooke
Fusiliers
007
314
Gaumesnil
223
N
Höflinger &
Westenhagen
Kampfgruppe
Waldmüller
Cintheaux

A montage of air photographs showing the action against Wittmann's Tigers.

Sturmmann Balho, the radio-operator in Tiger 312 or 009 who was knocked out and wounded, recalled 'Later we walked past the knocked-out panzer of *Hauptsturmführer* Wittmann with its turret ripped off.'

Trooper Ekins engaged the targets from his left to right and this Tiger, Call Sign 007, was his second target engaged at 800 yards and was the only enemy tank to suffer an internal ammunition explosion in this action, which displaced the turret.[12] *Hauptscharführer* Höflinger with his Tiger knocked out near Gaumesnil was now on his feet 'de-horsed':

Hauptsturmführer Michael Wittmann.

I stopped to look around and to my dismay discovered that five of our Tigers had been knocked out. The turret of Michel's tank was displaced

> to the right and tilted down somewhat. None of his crew had got out. I climbed into von Westernhagen's panzer and, together with Heurich, whose Tiger was undamaged, tried to get to Michel's tank. We could not get through. Dr Rabe also tried it, but in vain.

Velkliye Luki pulled forward into action again and by this time the surviving two Tigers had swung north-east away from the Caen-Falaise road and deeper into the killing area. '… when we came out again the third Tiger was milling around, he probably knew the other two had gone and he was looking for some cover.'

There was so much fire around the surviving Tigers that Ekins found it difficult to engage his third target. He eventually fired twice, knocking out his third Tiger in twelve minutes.

Kampfgruppe Waldmüller

Meanwhile, *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller had closed up and was in action. Across the open plain Kurt Meyer was watching:

> The panzers were hurled into the steely inferno. They have to prevent the enemy attack; they have to disrupt their plans. Waldmüller and his grenadiers are right behind. The brave infantrymen follow their officers. An endless chain of bombers is approaching from the north-west; town after town is being wiped out. There is only one answer: get out into the open fields.

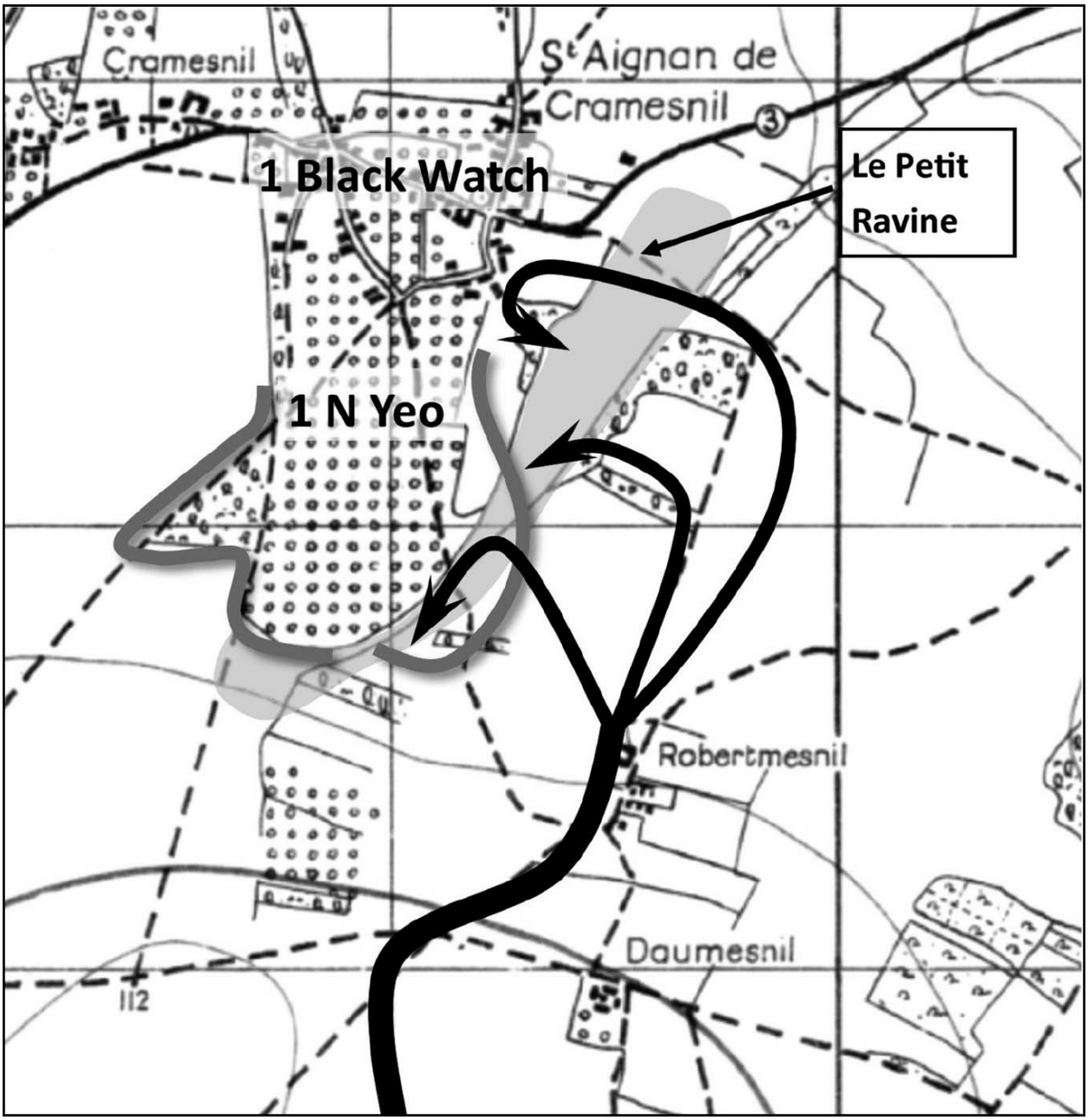
The need to escape from the bombing area, assumed to be 1,000 metres in front of the forward line of British and Canadian troops, inevitably sacrificed a degree of coordination. They escaped the worst of the bombing, but the US aircraft hit Canadian troops moving through Caen and south of the city, disrupting concentration of both the 3rd Infantry and 4th Armoured divisions.

The ground across which Waldmüller was advancing was quite different from the open 'killing area' in which Wittmann's attack was halted. There was more cover to use, provided by orchards and hedgerows around Robertmesnil and Daumesnil farms, as well as a wooded area to the east.

Allied artillery fire was heavy, with the medium and heavy guns pounding

approaches to the defensive line occupied by their infantry and tanks, but again the *Hitlerjugend* were materially aided by Allied friendly fire, this time on the orchard where the Northampton Yeomanry were located.

Waldmüller directed his advance around the eastern flank, which took the *panzergrenadiers* into some confused fighting with a troop of British tanks forward of a gully that was not marked on either Allied or German maps. In the encounter several Mk IVs were knocked out before the troop was picked off by a well-positioned panzer in a deadly game of cat and mouse that lasted from 1300 to 1345 hours. Playing a leading part in this was *Rottenführer* Eckstein, gunner in *Oberscharführer* Rudolf Roy's *Panzerjäger* IV. He earned 'the Iron Cross First Class for his outstanding bravery in the attacks on an enemy armoured formation at Saint-Aignan-de-Cramesnil. There he alone knocked out eight enemy tanks.'



Attack of *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller on Saint-Aignan-de-Cramesnil and the orchard.

The Northamptonshire Yeomanry were eventually driven back onto the Black Watch in St Aignan, where *Sturmmann* Helmut Wiese, the driver of a Panzer IV of the 5th Company of the 12th SS Panzer Regiment, encountered a 6-pounder anti-tank gun on the edge of the village:

> At the edge of the woods, enemy soldiers were moving an anti-tank gun into position. I reported to the turret, 'It is a new target for the forward

[co-axial] MG.' Our gun opens up as I drive at full speed. Otto, the commander, yells 'Stop! Stop! Back! Back! Faster!' I knew that the engine was running at its highest speed; it could not go any faster. I looked at the instruments; the tachometer was showing in the red … As I looked through my vision port I was blinded by an exploding brightness. There was a bang as if a full fizzy drink bottle fell on a tiled floor and burst. It was a direct hit to the front … Then the Panzer was shaken as if hit by a giant's fist; brightness, screaming, braking, splintering sounds, nothing remotely human. Then, a smell of sulphur and absolute calm. Our panzer is on fire and Otto orders us to 'Bail out!' I unlocked the hatch and push it upward; it only opens a few centimetres and flames immediately come through. The turret is blocking the hatch. I watch as Egon our radio man pulls his legs through his hatch. That is the way out. I crawl across the gearbox and the radio towards the hatch, but there was no more air; it was getting so hot, I wanted to get out; I thought 'I have had it!'

Then, I saw a face far away, and could see arms stretched out towards me and heard shouts: 'Helmut, come out!' I pushed and pulled, found fresh air and finally, I was outside, where I jumped off the panzer and dropped to the ground. Egon came back and got me out. 'Thanks, comrade!' Egon helped me to get up and I was on my feet again. Bullets whistled by, hitting the hull near us, so we ran around to the side away from the enemy, Otto is there. But where are Arno and Karl? Otto points to the turret, the side hatches were still closed, and he yells that 'Both were killed immediately, I was still inside!' That they were left in the turret was a terrible realisation.

Rottenführer Eckstein.

The *Hitlerjugend*'s *panzergrenadiers* reached the village, but before they could consolidate their gains they were ejected, being too few and by this stage too disorganized to hold it. Mortarman *Sturmmann* Karl-Heinz Decker was following up behind *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller:

> I remember one occasion, we were advancing through a wood, the infantry had gone ahead, and we were following with the mortars. We were no sooner out of the wood than we came under enemy fire; infantry and mortars firing on us from three sides. We had been marching along, in line, a good space between each man when a mortar shell exploded in the middle of our group. Two of my men were badly wounded, hit by shell splinters.
>
> We called out for the medics, but none were available. I could see some of our tanks not far away and fortunately for us they soon attracted the enemy fire; that gave us a break, but what to do? Looking back today, I'm not sure whether or not I did the right thing. I said, 'Put his equipment down, and get two *Zeltbahnen*, put the wounded men on them and we will carry them.'[13]
>
> While we were carrying the wounded, one of them said to me: '*Sturmmann*, I have a knife in my pocket, will you cut my leg off?' I said, 'I can't cut your leg off!' He said, 'Cut it off!' I had a look. His leg was only hanging by a thread, all mashed in with bits of uniform and debris. There was just one remaining piece of flesh that still connected his leg. I made a tourniquet; I think from the strap of my gas-mask container. I cut off the leg and threw it in the hedge. He was OK.
>
> The other lad was in a bad way, both legs and an arm badly smashed. We started to bring the wounded men back to our lines, eight of us carrying them, one man at each corner of the two *Zeltbahnen*. We were running doubled up, but we got them back. All the way back the chap with the two smashed legs kept asking for water, but you are not supposed to give them anything. I just wetted his lips. When we got to the field hospital the surgeon looked at him and said, 'Just put him there.' I think he was very close to death. The other one, whose leg I'd

cut off, survived. I hope he is still alive. I wish I could remember their names. I remember it was a hot day, the flies were everywhere.

Hitlerjugend crew in the turret of a Panzer IV.

My camouflage trousers were soaked in blood, from my belt down to my boots. The flies were all over me, you can just imagine. I removed my camouflage trousers and carried on in the uniform trousers I wore underneath. I went and sat by a ditch at the roadside and cried, I just cried. I pulled myself together; I got up and began to make my way back towards our original position when I was ordered to go in another direction, along a road, which I did. I ran into another group of Waffen-SS, but I didn't know any of them. I think they might have been part of *Kampfgruppe* Krause, or perhaps *Kampfgruppe* Bremer [remains of the Recce Battalion]. It was chaos in any event; we were just thrown together.

We never knew where we were exactly. All movement took place at night. I believe we were being used to plug gaps and weak points in the

lines.

Sturmführer Herman Walter recorded the last moments of one of his soldiers during the first day of TOTALIZE. ‘Herr *Sturmführer*, write to my parents and tell them that I was brave and died with a smile on my face and that I was happy to die for the Führer and Germany.’

Kurt Meyer was not content and ordered Waldmüller to mount a further attack on the orchard. This time the infantry was supported by panzers firing from cover around the farms. The *panzergrenadiers* advanced through the tall barley, but were heavily engaged by machine guns and artillery fire and were brought to a halt. A British tank commander recalled that as the attack culminated, a *Hitlerjugend panzergrenadier* stood up and shook his fist at the British positions in the orchard before turning and walking away. The same officer recalled that ‘About 30 minutes later a lot of stretcher-bearers came up and we stopped firing to let them take away their dead and wounded.’

An SS NCO shouts his orders.

The 12th Anti-Aircraft Battalion

In addition to the anti-aircraft assets organic to divisional headquarters, the escort company and the division's four regiments, the 12th *Hitlerjugend* Panzer Division also had a powerful anti-aircraft battalion. It started the campaign with three batteries each of four of the Flak 36/37 88mm guns rather than the normal panzer division establishment totalling eight guns. In addition, each battery had two Flak 38 20mm guns and two machine guns.

Training on the Flak 37 88mm gun in Belgium.

An *HJ* gun crew posing with their newly-issued gun.

When originally formed, the 4th Battery had nine towed single-barrelled 37mm guns, but at some stage they were re-equipped with 37mm guns mounted on the Sd.Kfz.7/2 chassis.

One of the *HJ*'s 37mm guns in action in Normandy.

The *Hitlerjugend*'s counter-attacks had failed, and they had not caused the expected disruption and delay to the advance of the two Allied armoured divisions but the Highlanders and their supporting tanks had been made to pay a heavy price. A Canadian operational analyst wrote of the *Hitlerjugend*'s counter-attack:

> … it would have been more favourable, considering tactical aspects, if SS *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller, reinforced with Tigers, had awaited the

Allied tank assault in the south-eastern area of Cintheaux, then, exploiting the temporary bafflement and organisational disturbance caused by initial losses, had launched a counter-stroke. In this case at least the exact enemy positions would have been known by all tank commanders taking part.

The Allied Armoured Divisions' Attack

As *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller fell back, the second phase of Operation TOTALIZE began. It had been intended that, with German positions penetrated to a depth of 5 miles, when they were unleashed the 4th Canadian and Polish Armoured divisions would exploit south at speed to within a couple of miles of Falaise. This did not happen for either division, but for differing reasons. However, during both divisions' passage of lines through the phase, one of the infantry divisions was dogged by delays caused by traffic jams, broken-down vehicles, mines and the friendly bombing. Consequently they, to paraphrase Guderian, 'felt with the fingers' rather than 'hit with the fist'.

In the case of the Poles they were hit before they reached St Aignan when they drove past Secqueville-la-Campagne, which was in the process of being belatedly cleared by the Highlanders. A combination of the loss of the division's interpreter section to the previous evening's bombing and over-enthusiasm to get into battle after years of frustration[14] led to warnings that the Germans were around Robertmesnil and Daumesnil farms were being ignored.

The sight of the Polish Shermans driving by far too close together had concerned onlookers of the Northamptonshire Yeomanry, but they were soon appalled as one after another, tanks were brewed up. One witness counted sixteen palls of smoke rising from blackened hulls in his area alone.[15]

The Poles had run straight into the panzers and *Panzerjägers* of *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller. The Polish commander, General Maczek, reported that at '1425 hours, 2 Tk Regt was stopped in [its] attack by twenty German tks, probably of German Tiger type and Mk IV, operating from area 108556 [Robertmesnil]. 24 Lancers were under enemy arty fire. The Comd 10 Armd Cava Bde required arty on the discovered targets.'

The Polish field artillery had not been as badly affected by the mis-bombing as the Canadian batteries or those of the AGRAs but even so, it took quite some time for them to get into action as they were moving forward at this time. It had been planned that during this phase, the Poles would, while moving their guns as far forward as possible, rely on the Highland Division's artillery, but they were still supporting their own troops. General Maczek continued:

> At 1450 hours, two Arty Regts opened fire with good results. At 1520 hours … 2 Tk Regt fell into a very difficult situation, its flank being menaced by German tks. The CO Bde, [eventually] arrived with help, covering the flank with 2 Coys, 10 Mounted Rifle Regt and with one A Tk Bty.

After another bombardment the Poles attacked again at 1550 hours, but this time they advanced far more cautiously. On their right, attempting to cross the open terrain, which German tanks and anti-tank guns now dominated so effectively, they made little progress and on their left a different danger lurked among the hedges around Robertmesnil, where SS *panzergrenadiers* waited with *Panzerfausts*. By nightfall the Poles had only made gains of just over a mile, but in the process had lost more than forty tanks knocked out or requiring repair.

The 4th Canadian Armoured Division had a different problem and that was that they were to advance on a narrow frontage, as little as 500 yards wide, squeezed between the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division on their right, various terrain features and the Poles on the left. In addition, it could be said that while the Poles had advanced 'impetuously', the reverse was true of Major General Kitching's tanks. Based on briefings by fellow armoured commanders about their experiences earlier in the campaign, caution was their watchword. Another difference was that while the Poles had run into ad hoc positions in difficult terrain around Robertmesnil, the Canadians faced Kurt Meyer's layered defence in more open country. This stretched back from Cintheaux to the high ground around Hautmesnil and on south to the area encompassing Quesnay Wood, Point 195 and the River Laize. The Allied pause to consolidate after phase one and wait for the second bomber

strike had given *Kampfgruppe* Krause time to re-deploy and dig in along with remnants of the 89th Division (see map, page 248).

It was now the Canadians' turn to advance into a killing area, with effective antitank fire from the hedges around Robertmesnil and from Cintheaux dominating the open ground across which the 4th Armoured were to advance. The *Hitlerjugend*'s intercept section was soon picking up numerous reports of 'Tigers', 'Panthers' and '88mm guns' followed by increasingly strident demands from commanders to 'get moving!'

SS troops manning an MG42 in the light role.

Only gradually did the superior numbers and Allied firepower begin to wear the Germans down. The village of Cintheaux was captured by the Canadians and one by one the *Panzerjäger*'s anti-tank guns were located and engaged but, as ever, casualties were particularly heavy in the towed batteries.

One Canadian battle group pressed on and secured a tenuous hold on the

higher ground around the Hautmesnil Quarry, but another battle group, with some three hours of daylight remaining, halted at Cintheaux having advanced only a mile during the afternoon.

So ended the first day of Operation TOTALIZE. II Canadian Corps had found a method of breaking through the deep German defences, but a break-out was prevented by the prompt and active reaction of Kurt Meyer, his staff and soldiers of the *Hitlerjugend*.

The Canadians in the centre of Cintheaux; the spot where only hours earlier Meyer had given his counter-attack orders.

General Eberbach reported the situation to Field Marshal von Kluge at

2100 hours:

> I SS Panzer Corps has established a defensive line of Pak [anti-tank guns] and Flak, which it has held until now. It is questionable if this line can be held tomorrow when the enemy attacks in earnest. The new division [the 89th] has practically been reduced to 50 per cent, the same holds true for the *HJ*. I would be happy if I could assemble twenty panzers tonight.

Von Kluge replied, 'We have to accept the fact that the decisive time will be tomorrow or the day after.'

In addition to the division's own 88mm flak and anti-tank guns, the Canadians reported 'an 88mm gun screen manned by G.A.F. [Luftwaffe] ground troops. III Flak Corps has arrived and is making itself felt.' In confirmation, the Fifth Panzer Army's situation report at 2125 hours recorded that 'General Pickert states that south of Langannerie [south of Bretteville-sur-Laize] an 8.8cm tank trap has been constructed. In addition, he has also ordered forward a flak *Kampfgruppe* from the Orne …' In short, the *Hitlerjugend* had by the evening of 8 August established a powerful blocking position astride Bretteville-le-Rabat.[16] This allowed *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller to be ordered to withdraw from the area of Robertmesnil to the high ground 5 miles to the rear.

TOTALIZE Continued: 9 August 1944

The previous evening *Feldmarschall* von Kluge ordered II SS Panzer Corps to dispatch their thirteen operational Tigers of 102 *Schwere* Panzer Battalion across the River Orne to join the *Hitlerjugend*'s defence on the road to Falaise. Additional guns from III Flak Corps were also on their way from other parts of Normandy to bolster the defence. Overnight in a remarkably concise set of orders, *Sturmbannführer* Hubert Meyer confirmed and adjusted those he had issued the previous morning:

The 88mm Flak 36/37 and its prime mover the Sd.Kfz.7, as issued to III Flak Corps.

- *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller (reinforced 1/25) will defend itself on the hills north of Maizières, north of Rouvres to Hill 140 inclusive, north-west of Assy. For this, the 1st Company, 12th SS *Panzerjäger* Battalion will be attached to it;
- *Kampfgruppe* Krause (reinforced 1/26) will defend itself in the sector of the hills north of Ouilly-Hill 183 at the Route Nationale;
- 111/26 [*Sturmbannführer* Olböter] will defend itself on the high terrain around Hill 195 (3km north-west of Potigny) and will absorb all arriving stragglers of 89 Inf-Div;
- 12th Panzer Regiment with attached 102 Heavy SS Panzer Battalion will assemble in the Quesnay forest (2km north-west of Ouilly). From there, it will carry out limited attacks to enable the setting up of the defences and prevent a breakthrough by enemy tank forces along the Route Nationale.

The war diary of the 12th SS Panzer Regiment records that overnight ‘the assigned Panzer VI (Tiger) tanks were withdrawn from their positions south of Hautmesnil in order to establish new positions eastwards at Soignolles.’ These are believed to be the three surviving Tigers of the 101st Heavy Panzer

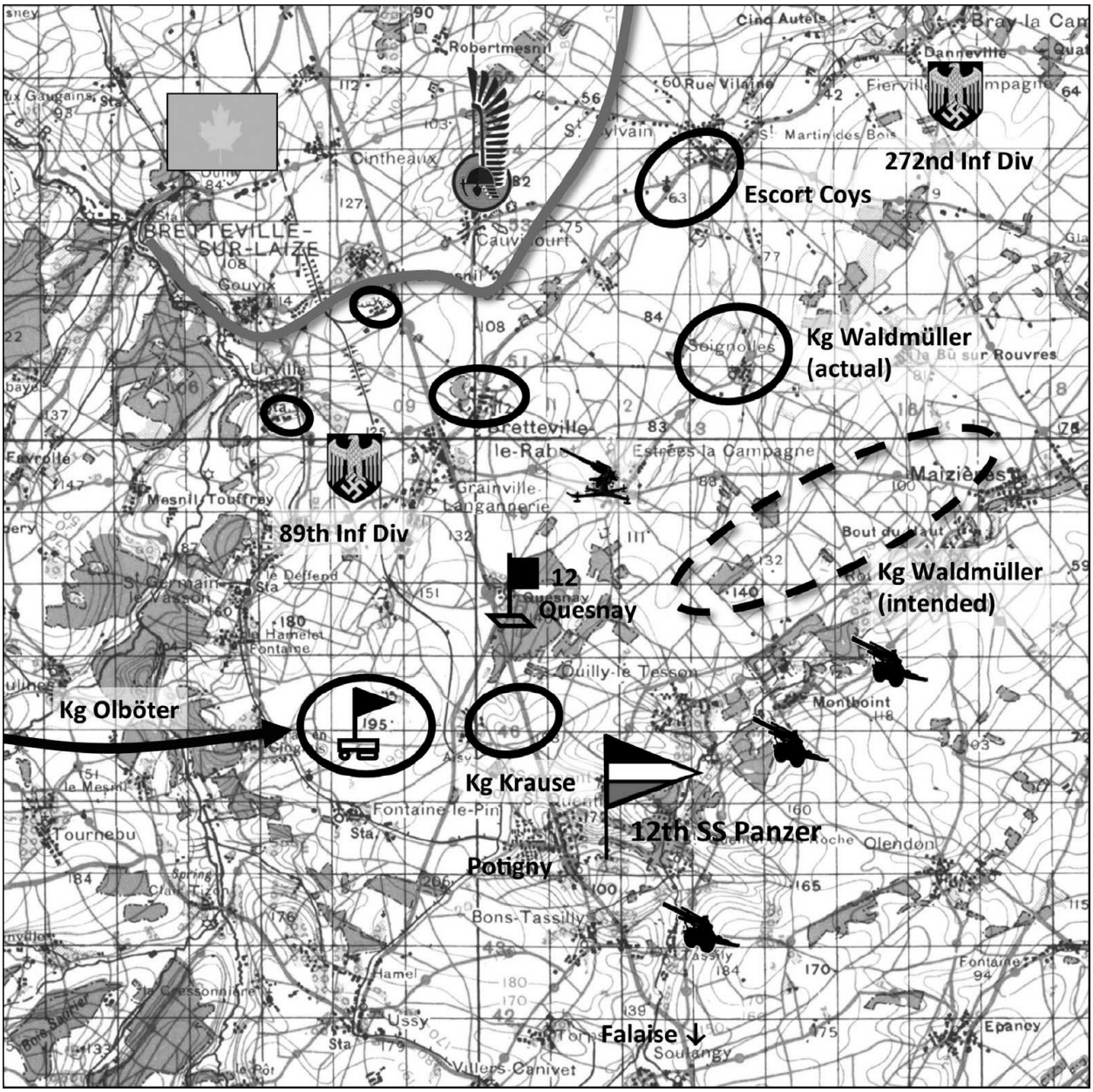
Battalion plus another three from repair:

- 12th SS Artillery Regiment with attached 12th *Werfer* Battalion will take up position south of the Laison in such a manner that it can go into action anywhere in the sector of the Division;
- 12th SS Flak Battalion will take up positions along the Route Nationale north of Potigny with the two 8.8cm batteries so that it can destroy enemy tanks which have broken through. The 4th Battery (3.7cm) and the attached 14/26 (2cm) are available for air defence.

NB: During the night, 12th Flak Battalion and elements of III Flak Corps in action at Bretteville-le-Rabat on the western flank exchanged positions.

- Reconnaissance Group Wienecke will establish and maintain contact with 272. Inf-Div;
- The Divisional Escort Company will leave *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller and assemble in Montboit (1.5km east of Ouilly) as Divisional Reserve [time did not permit this, as at daylight the company was digging in south of St Sylvian];
- The Divisional command post will remain at La Brèche au Diable.

Well before dawn most of the *Hitlerjugend* were in position, having overnight occupied blocking positions with the aim of ‘holding the line St Sylvian-Bretteville’. Surviving elements of the 89th Division that had not been co-opted by the *Hitlerjugend* were, according to Hubert Meyer, holding villages and concentrated west of the Caen-Falaise road. *Sturmmann* Erich Bissor was busy on his motorcycle delivering orders:



Deployment of the *Hitlerjugend* and the 89th Division astride the road to Falaise.

In the early morning of 9 August, I had to go from our Regimental HQ to a small task force near Hautmesnil. I was driving along the N-158, to us known as *Jabo-Rennstrecke* [*Jabo* racetrack]. Due to craters and burnt-out vehicles I could only drive slowly. On a small hilltop between Quesnay and Langannerie, I took a short stop to get orientated again. I mounted my bike to move on when I was suddenly under fire. I felt a mighty blow to my left arm and tumbled with my bike into a ditch. I spotted two M5 Greyhounds about 500–600 yards north-east of the road.

> I didn’t move until I saw them disappear behind some hedges. When I tried to get up, I felt the first real pain. My camouflage jacket was ripped apart and I couldn’t move my left arm. My bike had received a hit and shell splinters had penetrated my arm and upper body. I returned to our HQ on foot where I reported what happened. Then our Sani Uscha Fabian took care of my wounds and brought me to the field hospital.

Around midnight on 8/9 August, Headquarters II Canadian Corps had ordered the armoured divisions to ‘press on and take their objectives and not to give the Germans an opportunity to regroup’, but both Poles and the 4th Canadian Armoured Division lacked the training and experience to do this quickly or effectively at night.

In the case of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, the armoured brigade was to capture Bretteville and continue the advance south 4 miles to Point 195, while the infantry brigade would secure the Hautmesnil quarry area, villages and take over ground captured by the armoured battle groups. This was to be completed by dawn at the latest and would create the conditions for the seizure of the ridge of high ground north of the River Laison, Point 111 to Point 140. The remainder of the two armoured divisions were to follow, seize that ridge and exploit towards Falaise. It was soon clear that the Poles would not be able to advance until after first light.

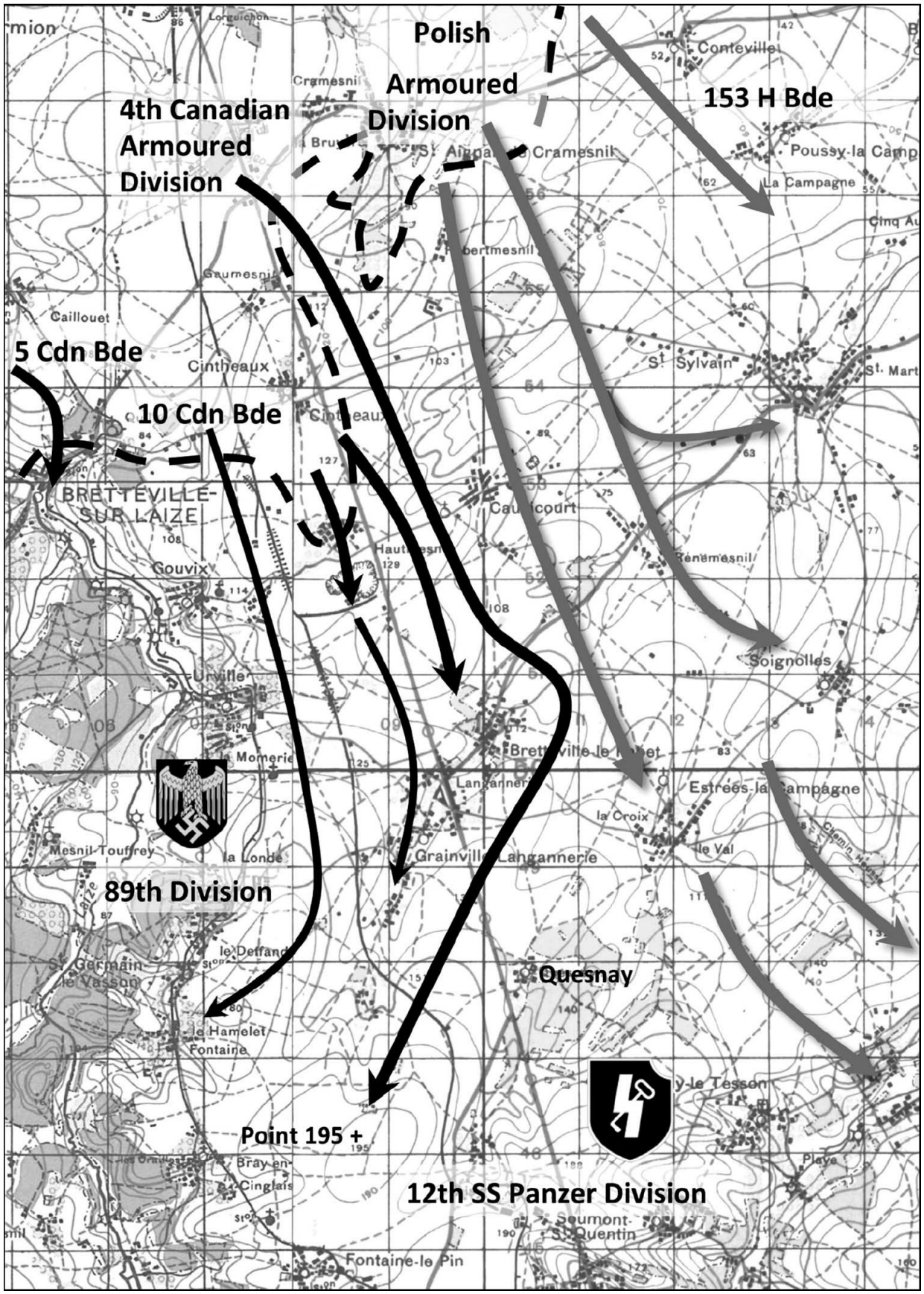
The Defence of Point 140

The Canadian Corps’ plan, however, miscarried from the start. Assembled in a column adjacent to the Caen-Falaise road, Worthington Force, consisting of the Shermans of the British Columbia Regiment and the infantry of the Algonquin Regiment, started moving at 0230 hours. They had only just advanced when they came under machine-gun fire from a wooded hedge just east of Cintheaux. This was most likely elements of the 89th Division that had not been properly cleared from the area the previous evening. After a delay the Canadians moved on, but in less than a mile they were again engaged, this time by *Hitlerjugend* outposts in Cauvicourt, and opposition stiffened as they passed into the gap between Cauvicourt and Hautmesnil. The southern part of the latter hamlet and quarry was held by elements of the

1st Battalion, 25th SS *Panzergrenadier* Regiment, under the command of *Untersturmführer* Willi Klein. He engaged, but in the darkness Worthington Force pressed on and with an armoured battle group bypassing him Klein withdrew from Hautmesnil before dawn, joining the rest of Waldmüller's *Kampfgruppe* near Soignolles.

Beyond Cauvicourt Worthington was brought under fire from a company of 88mm guns and the *Hitlerjugend*'s other flak guns that had been positioned covering Bretteville-le-Rabat. This village was the objective of another battle group, but the sequencing of the Canadian attack had broken down and in the dark the two battle groups became entangled.

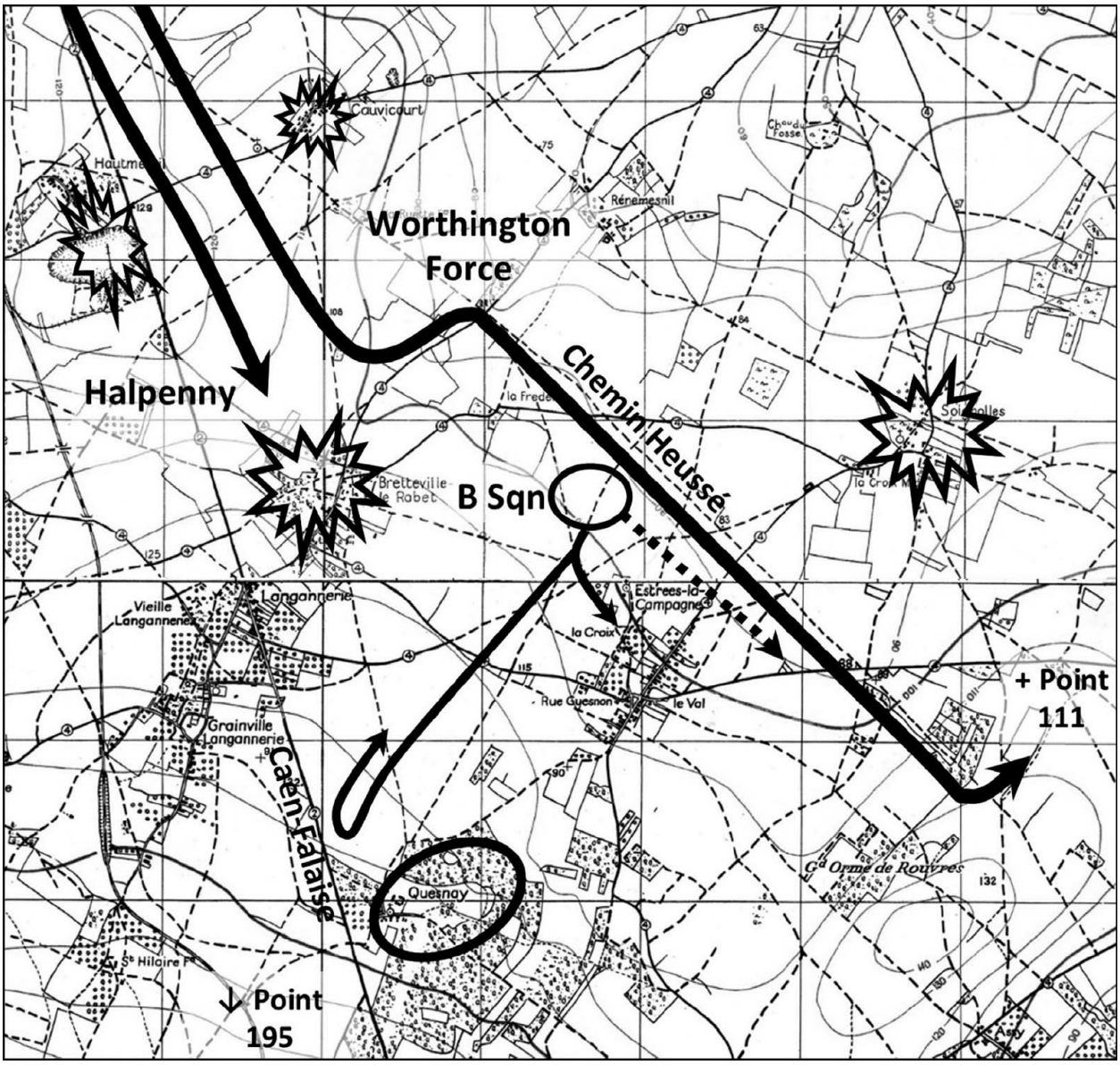
Eventually, Worthington ordered such parts of his force he had with him onwards. Passing Bretteville and its 88mm guns to the east and having swung around the village, they came across a broad straight road, which in the dark they mistook for the Caen-Falaise road, the only broad straight road to be seen on the map! This was in fact the old Chemin à Heussé built by William the Conqueror, but as far as the Canadians were concerned it was heading in the right direction.


Polish
Armoured
Division
4th Canadian
Armoured
Division
153 H Bde
5 Cdn Bde
10 Cdn Bde
89th Division
Quesnay
Point 195 +
12th SS Panzer Division
Conteville
Poussy-la Campagne
La Campagne
Cramesnil
Caillouet
Cintheaux
St Sylvain
BRETTEVILLE-
SUR LAIZE
Couvix
Urville
Soignolles
Estrees-la Campagne
Mesnil-Touffrey
la Londe
Grainville Langannerie
le Hamelet
Fontaine
Bray-en-
Cinglais
Fontaine-le Pin
Soumont-
St Quentin
Playe

The Canadian plan, am on 9 August 1944.

In the darkness Worthington's column of Shermans had achieved surprise and driven straight through scattered elements of the division, mainly *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller. Climbing onto some high ground at dawn they reported arriving at Point 195, but were almost 5 miles east at Point 111, a crest below Point 140. Now it was light, the parts of Worthington's command that had earlier become separated approached and were caught out in the open by Waldmüller's *Kampfgruppe* supported by panzers that had come forward to the outskirts of Estrées. Lieutenant John Stock watched the devastating results of the *Hitlerjugend*'s fire:

> When a Sherman was hit by anti-tank fire, particularly from the 88, there seems to be an immediate explosion and flames roared 20 or 30 feet out of the top of the turret. This was followed by two or three explosions of high-octane gas and the high-explosive shells and the ammunition racks exploding. As I watched through binoculars, the first tank that I saw hit … the whole tank became a roaring torch of flame. Most of the rest of the squadron followed suit.



Worthington Force's navigational error: what is believed to have happened.

Only two of the squadron's tanks survived the devastation to reach Worthington Force. What had happened? With the sound of anti-tank fire, *Obersturmbannführer* Max Wünsche had immediately dispatched panzers, probably Mk IVs, north-east from their hides in Quesnay Wood towards Estrées, where they protected the *Panzerjäger* and 88mm guns and added to the volume of fire that overwhelmed the Canadian squadron.

Standartenführer Kurt Meyer had been up before dawn and was at an observation post on the high ground above his divisional headquarters. From there he reported having seen British armour on Point 140. Getting onto the

radio, he found that Max Wünsche had already sent panzers to Estrées and dispatched a reconnaissance patrol out to Point 140. On arrival on the crest the patrol commander, *Obersturmführer* Meitzel, reported 'There are no German forces on the hill. There are enemy tanks on the high ground.' Kurt Meyer continued his account:

> Meitzel moved back in his armoured car to gain a more accurate picture of the enemy. As soon as he crossed over the ridge, his car received a hit. He was thrown out of the open turret. He was quickly surrounded by enemy infantry and captured.
>
> Reconnaissance soon clarified the situation. An enemy *Kampfgruppe* had occupied the high ground and dominated the Laison valley with its weapons.[17] That menace had to be eliminated at once if we were to hold the sector for the rapidly approaching the 85th Infantry Division[18]… The situation called for rapid action. The high ground had to belong to us once again.

A battle-scarred Panzer IV of II Battalion, 12th SS Panzer Regiment.

The high ground east of Point 140, it will be recalled from the *Hitlerjugend*'s

orders the previous evening, was to have been held by *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller. With, however, elements of his command scattered across the battlefield from Hautmesnil, via Cauvicourt, to Robertmesnil and beyond, he was unable to do more than withdraw them to Soignolles. Allied artillery, now restored to its normal efficiency overnight, made the prospect of withdrawing across open country to the high ground uninviting. The presence of Worthington Force on Point 111 had, as far as Waldmüller was concerned, cut him off, a situation that would only become worse once the Poles advanced.

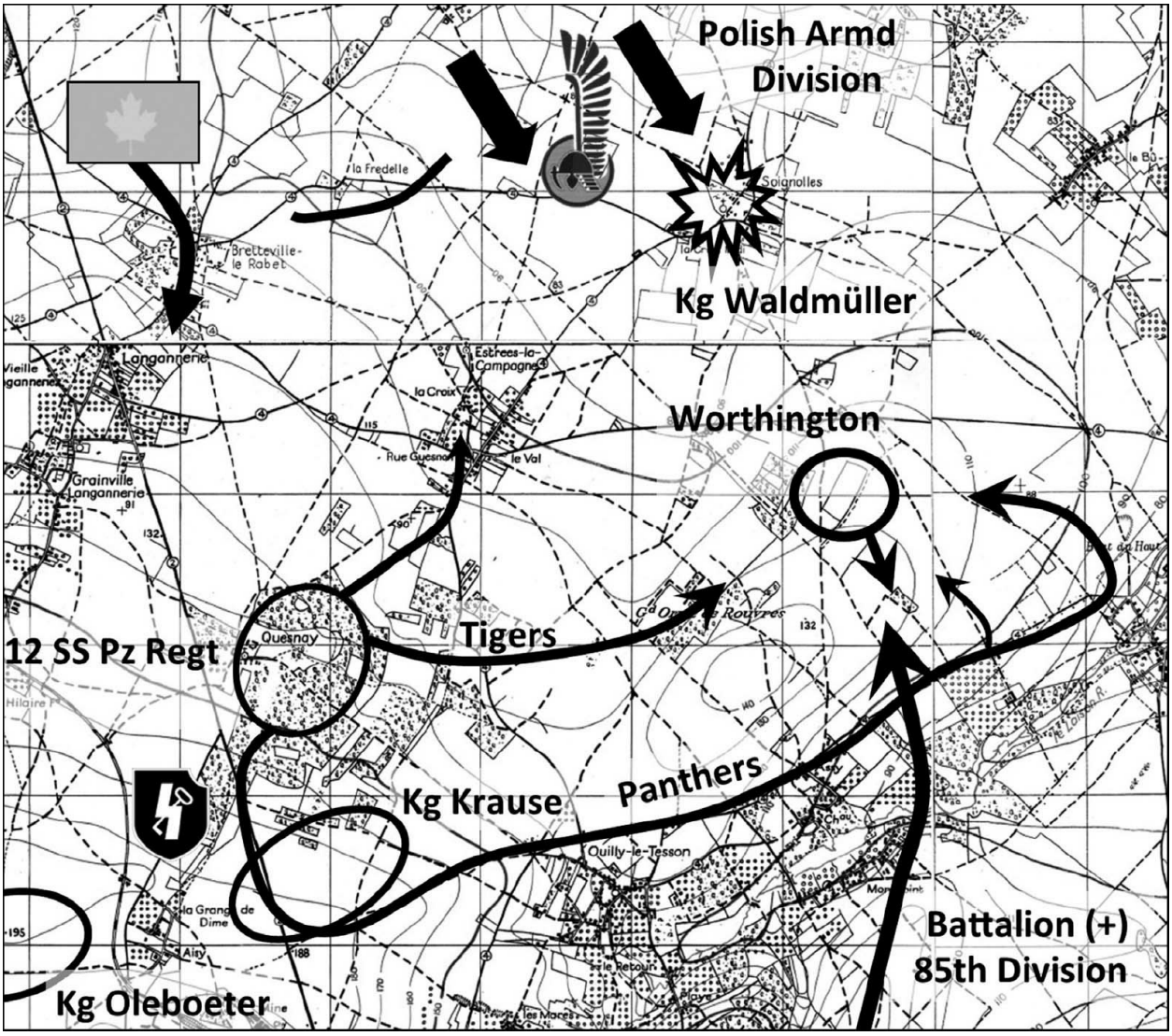
While the division prepared its counter-attack, up on Point 111, the Canadians, two squadrons (thirty-one tanks) and two companies, still unaware of the navigational error, prepared their defences. The calm on the ridge did not last long. Kurt Meyer explained the plan and what happened:

> Wünsche shouted a few words to his veteran tank crews and pointed to Hill 140. It was our intent to attack with some Tiger tanks from the west and with fifteen Panthers from the east. While the [five] Tigers slowly left the woods and approached the ridge, the Panthers rattled down the valley road towards Krause's sector so that they could wheel inward there. During the movement of the two tank groups, the hill came under artillery and mortar fire. Our only 88mm battery waited for targets in vain. The enemy tanks wouldn't venture beyond the ridge. Two Tigers took up firing positions … They had sneaked through the undergrowth unnoticed by the enemy and were on his flank. The first 88mm rounds slammed out of the barrels. Two Shermans exploded noisily. The enemy hammered at the Tigers they had spotted … The Tigers had chosen to fix the enemy with fire; they exploited their greater firepower. More and more enemy tanks were burning, sending telltale smoke into the sky.

With Worthington Force fixed, the Panthers were making their way around the south of Point 140 and the ridge. Kurt Meyer was with the Tigers when he

> suddenly saw the first Panthers. The enemy tanks were cornered at that point. Death and destruction hit them from the east. Pinning them through superior firepower would guarantee us success! Every thicket

and perilous spot was peppered with gunfire and the entire ridgeline was systematically covered. Smoke cloud after smoke cloud merged together. We could hardly believe that each cloud represented a tank's grave. Our lack of infantry prevented us from penetrating into the tree-encrusted northern slope of the ridge. Two bicycle companies of the 85th Infantry Division were expected at any moment.



The *Hitlerjugend's* counter-attack.

Still believing they were on Point 195, the Canadians were not willing to await the arrival of the rest of the division but took the battle to the enemy. A troop of tanks manoeuvred onto the lower slopes to bring the Tigers under fire from their flank, but in heading down off the high ground they were seen

by the Germans and the Shermans were knocked out. The Canadians made a second attempt at around 0900 hours, this time to clear a wood 400 yards to the south towards the crest of the ridge with six tanks, but only two Shermans reached the wood.

Here the pair fired HE rounds and machine guns at a series of enemy trenches occupied by leading elements of the 85th Division, which had just arrived. Once they were stationary in the wood, the Panthers were able to engage effectively, knocking out both Shermans in short order. I/12th SS Panzer Regiment's war diary records this part of the battle:

> Three of our panzers took up position on the right flank. *Untersturmführer* Fila engaged the enemy from an advantageous fire position and destroyed the four Sherman tanks threatening the left flank, but after this an anti-tank gun on the right flank knocked his tank out.

German infantry divisions normally had at least one battalion issued with bicycles for mobility.

By 1000 hours, the *Hitlerjugend* were being reinforced by increasing numbers of Wehrmacht infantry and the Canadians now faced counter-attack.

Meyer explained:

> The panzers pushed onto the track in the woods with the bicycle companies of the 85th Infantry Division, which had just arrived, and increasingly pressured the Canadian positions. At that critical juncture and taking advantage of the air attack, *Obersturmführer* Meitzel suggested to his captors that they surrender.

The Canadians, however, managed to beat off the attack, but then they were heavily mortared and were attacked by their own fighter-bombers, attracted by the smoke of burning Shermans, despite their yellow smoke and air marker panels. The Typhoons believed they were supporting the Poles who were still 3 miles to the north and returned to the area throughout the day. As the German panzers remained in cover, they suffered little damage.

The Canadians hung on at Point 111, but with *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller blocking the advance of the Poles, they were eventually overwhelmed at dusk before the survivors could exfiltrate back to their own lines.

For his part in the battle against Worthington Force, *Sturmbannführer* Jürgensen commanding the fifteen *Hitlerjugend* Panthers in action on 9 August on Point 140 was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. His citation written by *Standartenführer* Meyer reads:

> The enemy had broken through the positions of the 89th Infantry Division on the previous day … *Sturmbannführer* Jürgensen immediately attacked with his tanks. Regained the commanding Hill 140 and brought the enemy to a halt. That made it possible to recapture, as ordered, the positions on most favourable terrain. That in turn made it impossible for the enemy to break through to Falaise.

Elsewhere the brunt of the attack fell on the 89th Division who were defending the villages backed up by the anti-tank screen of the *Hitlerjugend*'s 88mm guns and *Panzerjäger*, plus the guns of III Flak Corps. Together they once again frustrated the Canadian aspirations to break out, slowing them down and inflicting heavy manpower and equipment losses, with one Canadian armoured regiment losing 75 per cent of its tanks. By the end of the afternoon, the 4th Canadian Armoured Division had gained a little over a

mile of ground south down the Caen-Falaise road; the high ground of Point 195 and 206 beyond still eluded them and in front of them the *Hitlerjugend* still sat firmly astride the road.

Arnold Jürgensen was promoted to *Sturmbannführer* when he took command of the

Hitlerjugend's Panther battalion.

Kampfgruppe Waldmüller: 9 August 1944

Waldmüller's incomplete withdrawal overnight to the village of Soignolles not only left Point 140 unguarded but disrupted the Polish Armoured Division's plans, delaying its start of operations until 1100 hours. Their objective was the high ground of Point 140 and the crossings of the River Laison a short distance beyond. The 153th Highland Brigade was to advance and cover the Poles' left flank.

Thanks to a successful reconnaissance at dawn, the Poles' commander appreciated that *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller was positioned in Soignolles on the direct route to Point 140. Consequently, he decided to neutralize that area with fire and a south-easterly advance first to St Sylvian and then south onto the high ground. St Sylvian village and surrounding area was, however, held by I SS Panzer Corps and the *Hitlerjugend*'s escort companies, still under command of *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller.

The *HJ*'s divisional history reveals some detail of their locations:

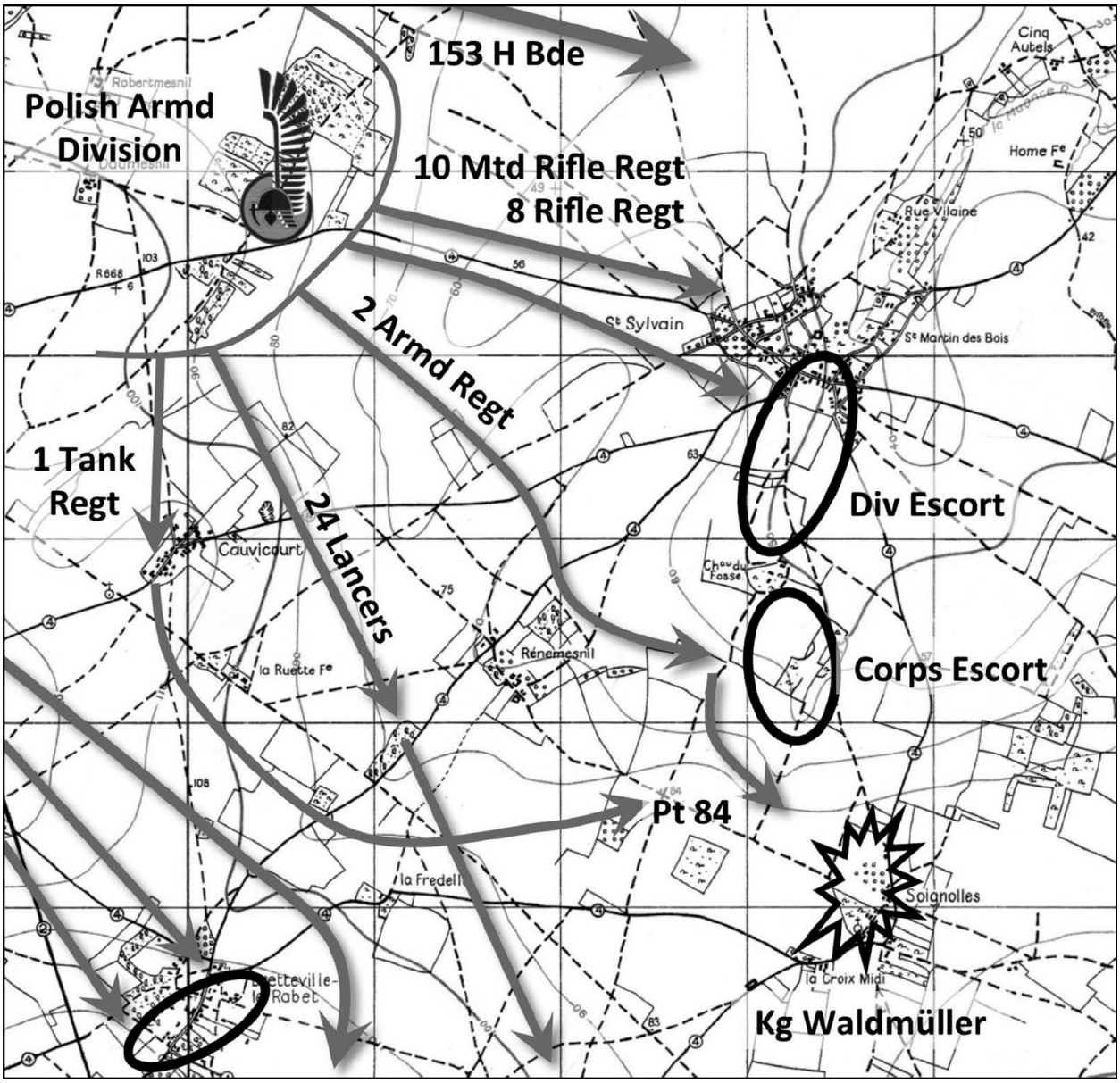
> The Divisional Escort Company had moved into a defensive position between St Sylvain and the Château du Fosse, located approximately 1 kilometre south-west of the town. The Muance stream, running on its right wing in a north-easterly direction, offered sufficient protection from tanks. The Corps' Escort Company was in position to the left of the Divisional Escort Company.

The Poles only realized that the St Sylvian area was properly defended when they advanced into their fire. *Unterscharführer* Freund of the *HJ*'s Escort Company was among the defenders:

> Our position was in the middle of open ground. In front of us was a wide and easily-observed field of fire, to our rear a huge harvested grain field, the sheaves of corn standing upright. A wooded area was behind this field … We could see the enemy panzers rolling towards us a long way away. However, the first push was directed at the Corps' Escort Company on our left. But then, all hell broke loose in our corner also. Suddenly, enemy panzers were sitting among our fox holes. One of the

panzers was right next to the company command post, camouflaged in a fair-sized hole in the ground, covered with tree trunks. The two 75mm Pak [anti-tank] guns, attached to the company, fired without pause at the enemy now coming at us from dead ahead. After several of them had been knocked out, the others stopped, suddenly and as if frightened … They opened fire on the two Pak guns. In the meantime, two of the panzers driving around among our positions had been knocked out, including the one next to the company command post. The other two or three immediately withdrew in the direction of the château [Château du Fosse]. Our two Pak guns were silenced by the concentrated enemy fire. But suddenly, the forward observer of our I.G. Zug [infantry gun platoon], *Unterscharführer* Kurt Breitmoser, appeared next to me and yelled: 'Let's go, over to the Pak!'

The two guns were sitting not far from us. One of them was destroyed, but the other still seemed in working order. However, the crews were all casualties. We loaded for the first time and Kurt Breitmoser aimed the gun deliberately at the enemy panzer closest to us. Direct hit! We were able to fire two more shells, then there was a sudden bang and we were hurled backward a few metres, landing in the sand. I was unharmed, but Breitmoser had been wounded in the head. His face was covered with blood and he hurried back to find a medic. However, it was not long before Breitmoser turned up again, his head bandaged down to the eyes. In answer to our surprised looks and questions he only said: 'There's no way I can leave you alone here, even if there isn't a helmet to fit me.'



The Polish Armoured Division's advance south during 9 August 1944.

The Divisional Escort Company was eventually overrun and that of the corps effectively destroyed. *Unterscharführer* Freund was among those who escaped:

> During the evening we withdrew eastward across the grain field to the wooded area. The enemy infantry first tried to pursue us. However, after our MGs had set the sheaves of grain on fire with tracer bullets, the enemy attack, carried out with great superiority, was fought off.

An SS machine-gun crew with their MG 34 mounted on a *Lafette* tripod.

Grenadier Günther Hase wasn't so lucky: he became split from his fellow infantrymen during the attacks:

> I lay in tall grass, trembling and terrified as the enemy soldiers raked the whole area with machine-gun fire and sent in panzers which crossed the ground this way and that trying to force out any stragglers. In the end I saw it was useless and gave up. They pushed me about and took all my possessions and my watch and gave me a kick which sent me sprawling, and off I went behind the Tommy lines under guard and met a few of my comrades, which was a great relief.

St Sylvian remained in the *Hitlerjugend*'s hands throughout the 9th and in the centre the Polish Armoured Division's attack on the village of Soignolles and its surrounding orchards had stalled by 1600 hours. They had advanced by just under 3 miles.

As far as the Germans were concerned, the Polish attacks had fixed and isolated Waldmüller's *Kampfgruppe*. Consequently, he was ordered to hold his positions, which with the exception of the losses described above to the

escort companies, he did remarkably well, containing the Poles' advance. Losses of men and antitank guns mounted; neither of which could be replaced. Hubert Meyer wrote in the divisional history that 'At 2120 hours 5th Panzer Army reported to the Army Group that the total panzer inventory of I SS Panzer Corps was only 15 Panzer IVs, 5 Panthers and 15 Tigers (after 102nd Tiger Battalion was assigned).'

Evening: 9 August 1944

As dusk fell, *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller managed to gather many of its disparate elements, but they were attacked by the Poles as they started to pull back from Soignolles during the evening. Fortunately for Waldmüller, caught in a potentially very difficult situation, two *Jagdpanzer* IVs of the 1st Company, commanded by *Obersturmführer* Hurdelbrink and *Oberscharführer* Roy, were still in position, with 75mm gunner *Rottenführer* Eckstein knocking out tank after tank of the leading Polish squadron. By 2200 hours the attack was beaten off and the *panzergrenadiers* continued their march south to the high ground unopposed, as the attack was not renewed.

Obersturmführer Hurdelbrink.

Elsewhere during the course of the afternoon, Canadian infantry had caught up and fought through the straggling villages of Langannerie and Grainville against resistance by soldiers of the 89th Division. In order to speed up the pace of operations and ‘force the gateway south to Point 195’, an armoured battle group was ordered to swing around the villages to the east. In doing so, it drove past Quesnay Wood, where the last few uncommitted panzers lay concealed. The fire of the few panzers available, at a range of less than 500 yards, drove the battle group into the cover of low ground with significant losses. The Canadians had been lucky: with more panzers, the ambush on the edge of the Quesnay Wood could have inflicted grievous losses.

With the way south to Point 195 again blocked by anti-tank fire, the Canadians changed tactics. At 2200 hours a battalion of Canadian infantry was resting following the capture of Langannerie when the commanding officer received orders from a Divisional Headquarters liaison officer to take the elusive feature. After brief orders the battalion set off on foot in single file, silently making their way more than 2 miles south to quietly insert itself onto Point 195.[19]

Meanwhile, *Kampfgruppe* Olböter, based on III/26th *Panzergrenadiers*, was by the night of 9/10 August well dug in, being sited on the reverse or southern slopes of Point 195. From these positions they had open fields of fire onto the broad and open crest of the feature but would avoid the worst of the crushing weight of the Allied artillery, which would be map-predicted, i.e. unobserved fire and less than fully accurate.

The Canadian infantry reached the open northern slope of Point 195 at 0430 hours, having taken a circuitous route west to avoid Quesnay Wood and *Kampfgruppe* Krause. Lying down to prevent themselves from being sky-lined against the dawn sky, they ‘dug like hell’, knowing that when discovered their only hope of survival would be to be below ground. Hacking their way through the chalky limestone, the trenches were little more than a foot deep. At dawn, on the southern side of 195, Olböter’s exhausted grenadiers realized that the Canadians were on the feature, or at least a part of

the broad plateau.[20] The *Kampfgruppe*'s mortar barrage was followed by a hasty counter-attack by the *panzergrenadiers*, which focused on the position of a Canadian 17-pounder that was still being dug in. Thus the first attack by *Kampfgruppe* Olböter failed with twenty-seven prisoners being taken. *Standartenführer* Kurt Meyer described the scene:

Throughout the Battle of Normandy German sharpshooters took a heavy toll on Allied soldiers, particularly commanders.

> When I reached the hill Olböter was in the middle of his soldiers, leading them in a counter-attack. The enemy had broken into the widely-dispersed positions and was just about to capture the entire hill. The *panzergrenadiers* attacked the enemy spearheads in shock troop fashion.

The End of TOTALIZE: 10 August 1944

Attacks across the open fire-swept plateau simply could not succeed and a stalemate set in. Meanwhile, the Canadians wanted to exploit their perceived

success, take Point 206 and expand the breach by securing the ridgeline to the east. The *Hitlerjugend* were determined to hold the feature which provided views over the valley of the River Laison and south to Falaise. If the Canadians were to be blocked, the long ridge had to be held!

A renewed attack across Point 195 to 206 did not go well. An armoured battle group, the same one that had been hit the previous afternoon from Quesnay Wood, lost four tanks on its approach march and then when preparing

> for a further advance south, unwisely positioned themselves on a forward slope while their commanding officer held an O Group. They were hit from three directions by anti-tank fire and enemy tanks that sniped at them from the edge of Quesnay Wood to their rear and were even attacked by miniature robot tanks. By 1300, when they withdrew to a better position behind the crest of the ridge, the Grenadiers were down to fifteen tanks, a quarter of their strength.[21]

I SS Panzer Corps authorized the deployment of three 'miniature robot tanks' or Borgward B IV radio-controlled tanks operated by the 301st *Funklenk* Battalion. They were sent over the ridgeline to detonate among the Canadian tanks and infantry.[22] 'These were about the size of carriers, carried a white flag on top of their aerials, travelled at about 12 to 15 miles per hour and increased our difficulties.'[23]

A further attempt to take Point 206 at midday by a fresh battle group failed largely due to the continued presence of panzers in Quesnay Wood and 88s firing at a range of some 2,000 yards from Point 206. Olböter continued with counterattacks until 1930 that evening.

A Borgward B IV and its smaller cousin, the Goliath.

Quesnay Wood and Ridge

To the east the Polish Armoured Division had been ordered to renew attacks on Point 140, cross the River Laison and take Sassy. Their divisional history, however, records that much of the attacking force was broken up before it got under way due to heavy German artillery fire, no doubt directed by observers on the ridge who had good views across the open country below.

Eventually a Polish infantry company did reach Point 111 and reported ‘hand-to-hand combat with German troops [of the 85th Division] took place’. The Poles suffered significant losses and fell back, with a second attempt also failing to hold gains. Once reinforced, Point 111 was captured at nightfall. The Poles also claimed to have captured Point 140, but *Sturmbannführer* Hubert Meyer pointed out that ‘the left wing of *Kampfgruppe* Waldmüller was located on Hill 140’ and they had not been heavily engaged and remained in place. In capturing Point 111, the Poles had also established a toehold on the high ground.

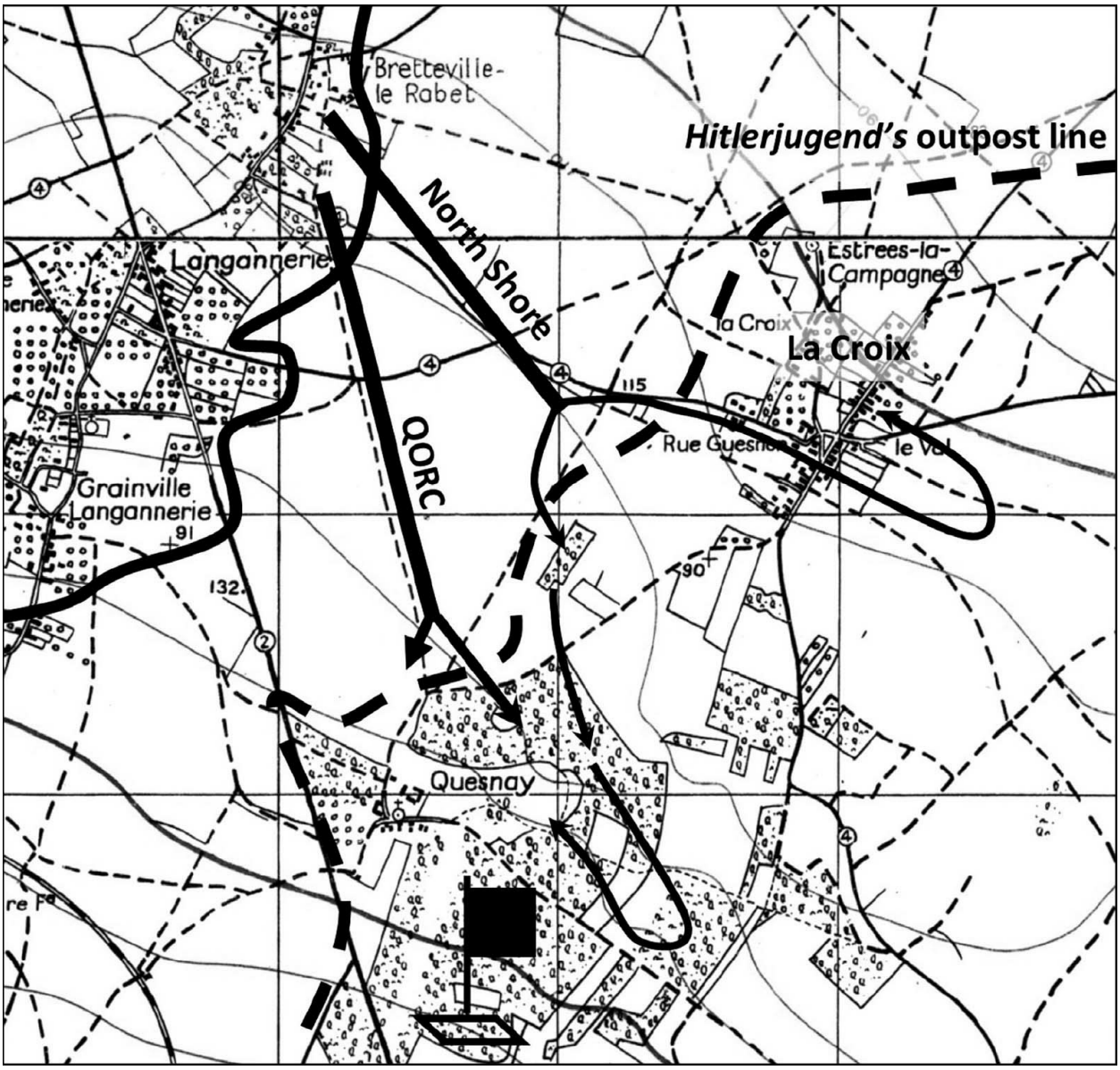
By mid-afternoon it was more than apparent that the key terrain of Quesnay Wood had to be in Canadian hands before an advance to the Laison

would succeed. *Standartenführer* Meyer commented: ‘The high ground could be held with the assistance of the panzers that were providing cover … he [the enemy] was exposed to flanking fire from the panzers in the Quesnay Wood … A few could hold out against many there.’ The few in this case were twenty-three panzers and a part of *Kampfgruppe* Krause.

After much delay the Canadians finally attacked with two infantry battalions at 2000 hours following a fighter-bomber strike. The Canadians advanced over a mile of ‘horribly open country’ covered by a bombardment, including a creeping barrage, fired by the artillery of the two armoured divisions and the supporting AGRA.

Having sheltered in what was left of the wood from the bombardment in their trenches and vehicles, when the artillery fire lifted the *Hitlerjugend*’s *panzer-grenadiers* and panzers opened fire on the Canadian infantry which were as close as 150 yards from the edge of the wood. Some enemy platoons got close to the wood in the gathering dusk, but the whole battalion reported being pinned down. The Canadian war diary noted ‘There were tanks firing on them from an unknown source … Snipers and MGs firing from the woods on the right.’

A mile further east another battalion was attacking the village of Le Croix and outlying woods. They fared better against lesser opposition and gained the crest, clearing woods as they moved south. Once they were over the crest, however, the artillery that had been instrumental in firing them onto the ridge became ineffective as radio contact started to fail as they went further into the increasing darkness. As the survivors fell back, the Canadians record bloody close-quarter encounters with the *panzergrenadiers* in the wood.



The Canadian attack on Quesnay Wood.

A knocked-out Panther in one of the devastated villages on the road to Caen.

The Canadian withdrawal began once it was dark, but some hung on until just before dawn on 11 August. By then it was obvious to them and their commanders that their tenuous hold on the wood could neither be reinforced nor exploited. Operation TOTALIZE had culminated, having run out of steam.

The Canadians had been unlucky with their timing of TOTALIZE: another day and the *Hitlerjugend* would have been off to the west and the way south less contested. The greatly weakened *Hitlerjugend*, despite Von Kluge's fear on the evening of 8 August that 'We have to accept the fact that the decisive time will be tomorrow or the day after', had held out against five divisions, two of them fresh armoured formations. Hopelessly outnumbered yet preventing an Allied breakout south of Caen that the German command in Normandy so feared was a remarkable feat of arms for the *Hitlerjugend*

Panzer Division, its commanders, staff and young soldiers.

Chapter Nine

Endgame in Normandy

> ‘Further Canadian attacks will inevitably lead to catastrophe. We are at the end of our tether. The last ten weeks have sucked the marrow from our bones.’ [Kurt Meyer’s personal diary]

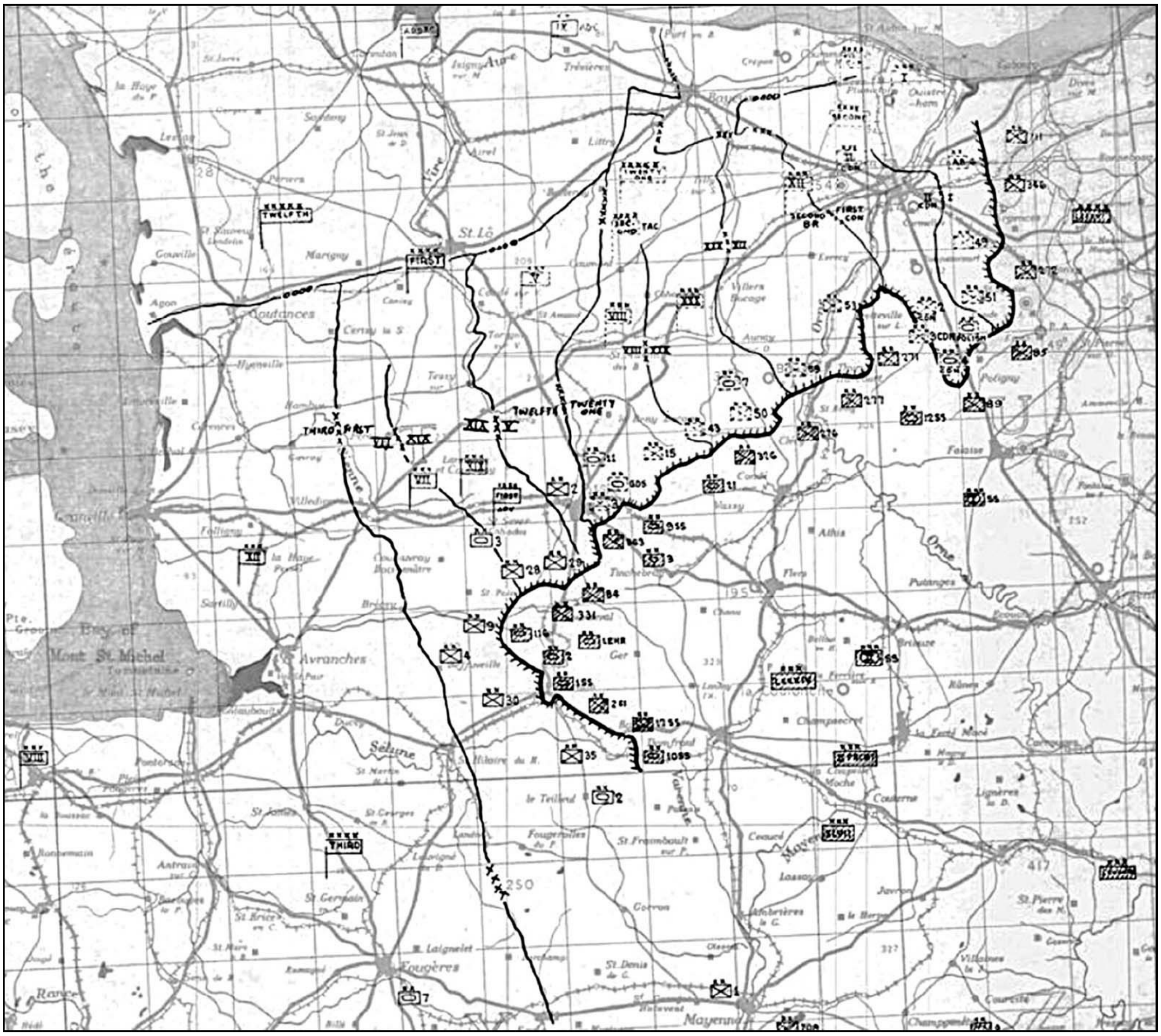
On 10 August after two days of intense fighting the *Hitlerjugend* had ground II Canadian Corps’ Operation TOTALIZE to a halt at Quesnay Wood and on Point 195. By 2100 hours on 12 August they had been relieved at the front by the remnants of the 89th Division and the bulk of the 85th Division and resumed the role of I SS Panzer Corps’ reserve south of the River Laison, with once again a greatly reduced strength. The division’s combat strength now totalled approximately 2,500 men, of which only 400 were combat infantry, with 35 AFVs.[1] In other words, in common with German formations across Normandy, the division was reduced to little more than a regimental *Kampfgruppe*. In the coming phase of the campaign such panzers as were still serviceable would increasingly be parcelled out, not only to support *HJ panzergrenadiers* but the corps’ ordinary infantry divisions as well.

The Fifth and Seventh armies were in an increasingly parlous state. *Obergruppenführer* Sepp Dietrich, now commanding Fifth Panzer Army, joined other senior commanders in warning of disaster. He wrote to General Hans Speidel, Chief of Staff of Army Group B: ‘Unless every effort is made to withdraw the forces eastwards and out of the threat of encirclement the army group will have to write off both armies.’ Following a visit to Dietrich’s headquarters, when Field Marshal von Kluge, Commander-in-Chief West, saw the situation for himself, he signalled Berlin that ‘Unless a far-reaching decision is taken immediately the entire army group is lost.’ Hitler was,

however, not yet prepared to countenance a withdrawal from Normandy and in the aftermath of the 20 July bomb plot, few were prepared to argue. In this climate, the very act of expressing doubts saw von Kluge relieved of his command; he committed suicide on the way back to Berlin.

Within the division *Standartenführer* Kurt Meyer's account hints at an ebbing away of political commitment:

> We all knew that the fighting would only end with death or capture, but nobody was ready to stop fighting. The thought of the call for Germany's unconditional surrender formulated by the Allies at Casablanca kept us motivated to continue fighting … My comrades were not fanatics; they wanted to live and, if possible, return home in good health. No, no, it was not that fanaticism so often claimed by the enemy that compelled us to fight on! We did not throw away our weapons because we still believed we had to fight for our homeland.[2]



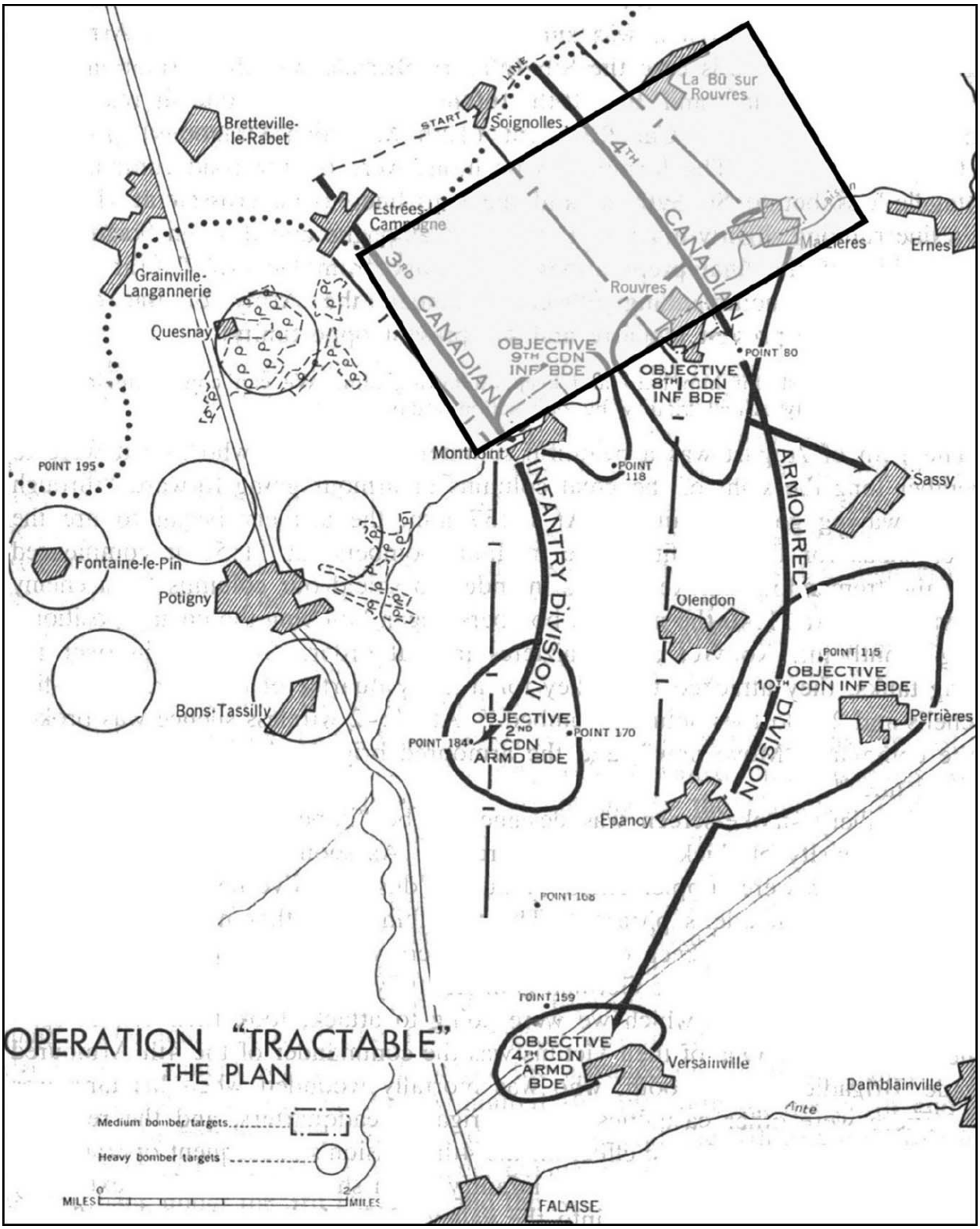
An extract from the US 12th Army Group situation map as at 1200 hours on 11 August 1944.

To the west with the US Third Army spilling out of Normandy into Brittany and the US First Army beginning to turn east, Montgomery’s ‘intention [remained] to destroy the enemy forces between the Seine and Loire’. His directive M 518, issued on 11 August, stressed the importance of Falaise, which he emphasized by making its capture by either the First or the Second Canadian armies ‘the first priority’, after which Argentan was to be the objective.

Operation TRACTABLE: 14–16 August 1944

With priorities given along with an H-hour of 1200 hours on 14 August, General Simonds had a very short time to plan II Canadian Corps' next drive to Falaise, Operation TRACTABLE. Consequently, he adapted his TOTALIZE plan and moved the main effort further east, thus avoiding the Quesnay Wood, Potigny and Point 195 area, which were believed to be still strongly held. He was to attack with the 3rd Canadian Infantry and 4th Canadian Armoured divisions on a frontage of just over 2 miles, with the 51st Highlands advancing to cover the left flank. Initially, the corps was to seize the ridge centred between Points 111 and 140 and then the crossings of the River Laison before driving south to the high ground just north of Falaise.

The operation was to begin at 1137 on 14 August with red flares being fired by the artillery to mark the target for fifty-three medium bombers (Mitchells and Bostons). The bombing was followed by a major artillery barrage of high explosive and smoke fired into a target box across the front of the attack to a depth of almost 3 miles. This smoke, which was to replace the shrouding darkness of TOTALIZE, was intended to be thicker on the flanks but in the event as the armoured Canadian armoured regiments crossed their start lines at 1200 hours, they found it provided variable cover. In some places the smoke was light and in others visibility was just 3 yards, to which vehicles added dust thrown up by tracks and wheels.



The Canadian *Official History* map of TRACTABLE with the initial target box added.

One significant change in Canadian tactics was that the mixed battle

groups of infantry and tanks had been replaced by a system in which the Shermans of the two armoured brigades led, followed by the infantry, either mounted in Kangaroos and other vehicles or following up on foot.

When they attacked, as with TOTALIZE, opposition by the forward German divisions was patchy and there was some confusion in the smoke resulting in disorientation among the hundreds of vehicles; nonetheless, by 1300 hours the Canadians had reached the Laison. The river had been assessed as ‘not much of an obstacle to armour’, but though shallow it had a muddy bottom in which tanks bogged and in some stretches the banks were impassable. Eventually, with the aid of fascines and dozer blades, plus the capture of sufficient useable bridges, bridgeheads were secured.

Meanwhile, 417 Bomber Command Lancasters and 352 Halifax aircraft struck targets supposedly astride the Falaise road. Poor identification of these targets was exacerbated by the fact that they were being marked with yellow artillery smoke which was also routinely used by forward troops to ward off friendly aircraft. The consequence of this oversight was that the ground troops’ smoke grenades had the opposite effect and led to serious fratricide as far back as Saint-Aignan-de-Cramesnil.

One notable victim of the artillery bombardment that resumed following the departure of the bombers was the death of *Hauptsturmführer* Karl Heinz Prinz, whose panzers had come forward to support the collapsing front. He was killed in the village of Le Torps by a direct hit. *Obersturmbannführer* Wünsche took over direct command of II Battalion before handing it back to *Hauptsturmführer* Tirschler of the 6th Company later in the day.

With the Canadians having advanced 3 miles and climbed out of the valley onto the open ridges, the *Hitlerjugend* were in prepared positions around Point 159. *Standartenführer* Kurt Meyer recalled:

> Wünsche, Krause, Olböter and I moved to the sector north-west of Falaise to draw up the new positions. Hill 159 north of Falaise dominated the sector and we immediately occupied it, setting up a series of strongpoints. Other prominent terrain features east of Hill 159 as far as the Dives River comprised our ‘front’.

The Canadians, however, were halted before dusk by the 85th Division’s

reserves on a line Sass-Olendon. Consequently, the majority of the division's infantry were only subject to the air attacks and long-range artillery fire. A factor in halting the Canadians was that on the previous day an armoured car of a Canadian recce unit had been captured along with an officer who was found with a set of orders for TRACTABLE! This resulted in I SS Panzer Corps redeploying a *Panzerjäger* battery into the Laison valley to take on the Canadian armoured spearheads, which were unsupported by infantry.[3]

Sturmbannführer Karl Heinz Prinz, commander of II Battalion, 12th SS Panzer Regiment.

Other elements of the division were, however, in action on 14 August. The Panthers of the 2nd and 3rd companies were amalgamated to form a sub-unit of fifteen panzers and were spread out in platoon groups supporting the 85th Division, Olböter's III/26th *Panzergrenadiers* and the Divisional Escort Company. The latter were facing the 2nd Canadian Division, which was threatening to attack across the River Laize to the west in the 89th Division's area. Here on the morning of the 14th a platoon of Panthers and several Tigers from the 102nd Heavy Panzer Battalion blunted two Canadian assaults, adding punch to German infantry counter-attacks that restored the main battle line.[4]

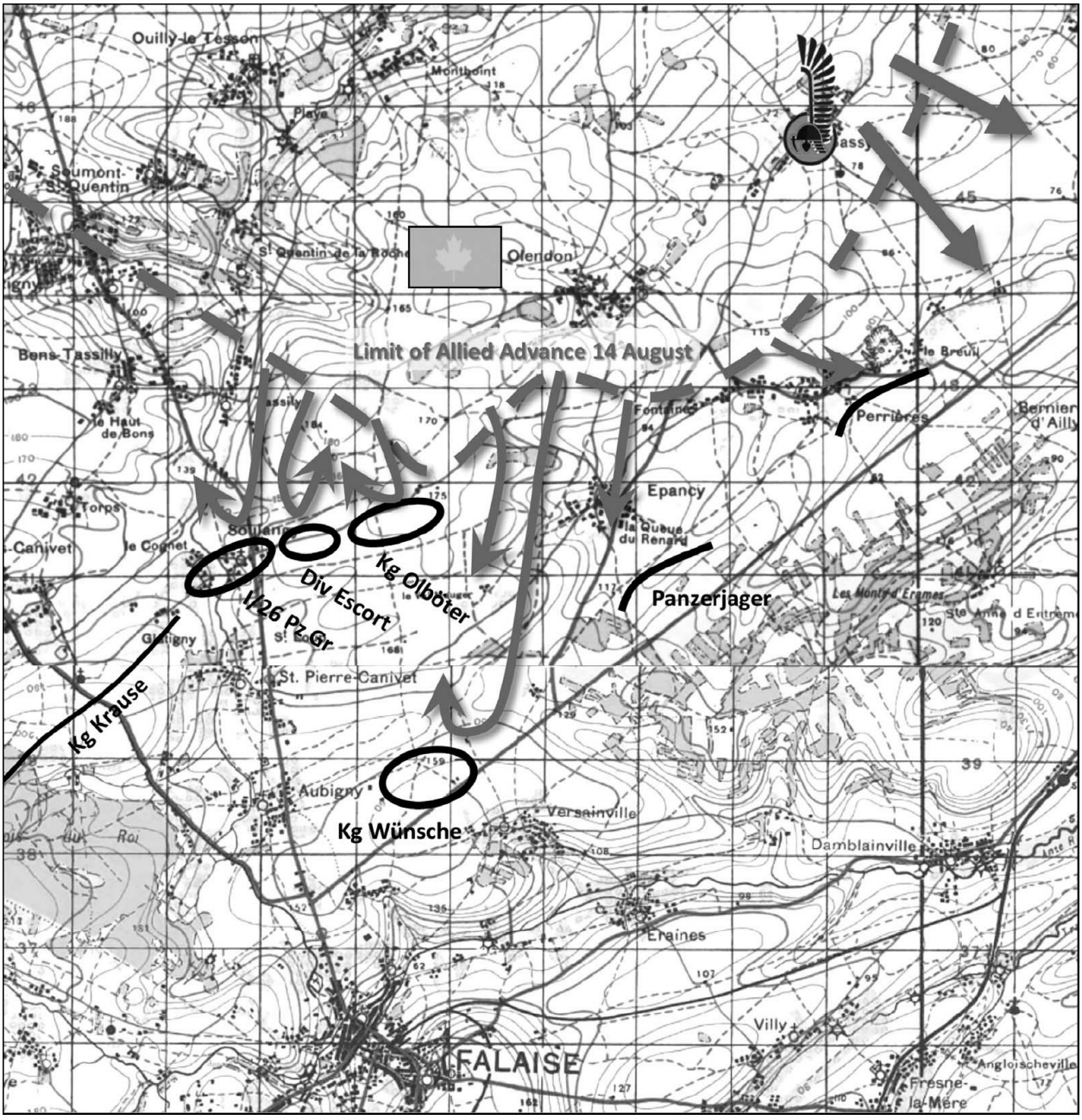
The Point 159 Defensive Line: 15 August

The 15th began with Olböter having returned to the divisional *Kampfgruppe*, marching overnight to pre-prepared positions around Soulangy on the Falaise road, supported by several *Panzerjäger* on Point 168. As luck would have it, a dump of artillery ammunition was found nearby, so for once they had an adequate supply of shells. The panzers were concentrated further back, deployed as an anti-tank screen on Point 159 along with stragglers from the 85th Division who volunteered to join the panzers. The *Panzerjäger* were deployed off to the east on the high ground south of Epancy, Monts d'Éraines, with a handful of men of I/25th *Panzergrenadiers* in what were described as 'ambush positions'. Beyond them near Perrières were the infantry of the 85th Division.

The *Hitlerjugend* did not have to wait long before the action began, as recalled by Kurt Meyer, with a heavy artillery bombardment:

> … within a short time, Point 159 was on fire. Round after round impacted into the earth and eviscerated it. Our panzers had been dispersed in ambush positions. They were waiting for the dark shadows which would soon come out of the grey wall of smoke and dust. Did we still have courage; could we still be recognized as human beings? Our eyes wandered again and again into the wall of shellfire … Would there be a mass of tanks suddenly appearing out of the wall of fire? Would

yesterday's spectacle be repeated?



The *Hitlerjugend*'s deployment on 15 August 1944.

On the division's right the 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade attacked Epancy, with the Canadians conceding that 'the Algonquins had a long hard fight before the place was secured.' With, however, the *Panzerjäger* on the high ground to the south-east, the Canadians made no further advance from Epancy.

The 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade attacked astride the N158 Falaise road at Soulangy at 1100 hours, but despite repeated attempts to dislodge them, I/26 *Panzergrenadiers* held their ground, having recovered the village by a well-timed counter-attack supported by Tigers. Just to the east of Soulangy in more open country Olböter's battalion was forced back, but enemy exploitation south and a potential envelopment of Soulangy was prevented by the *Panzeräger* on Point 168. The Canadian Hussars report 'encountering nasty anti-tank fire'. Ground had been lost; nonetheless, the enemy's drive to Falaise had been contained. There was, however, a significant gap between Epancy and the Soulangy area, leading to the Canadians' most important objective, which, with the forward troops of the *Hitlerjugend* fighting their own immediate battles, was not covered by fire. On that objective, Point 159, Kurt Meyer was contemplating the enemy's overwhelming strength and wondering 'Why did he waste such an enormous amount of bombs and rounds on the poor remnant of the 12th SS Panzer Division? His vastly superior numbers of tanks only had to run over us at full speed to finish us off.' He continued:

> Would we be lying under creaking tank tracks in the next few moments? Nothing of the kind happened. The first enemy tanks were burning, and the enemy infantry was pinned to the ground by well-aimed bursts of machine-gun fire. After that the enemy tanks kept their distance and didn't overrun us. They were stopped in front of Point 159.

On this occasion the Canadians had advanced beyond the range of the majority of their field guns and, still lacking proper infantry support, were driven back by heavy fire from the *HJ*'s artillery and panzers. This was a serious setback for the enemy offensive, which against lesser opposition had started so well the day before, but now up against the *Hitlerjugend*, despite an advance of 8 miles, failed to make the expected breakthrough. Thanks to the *Hitlerjugend,* TRACTABLE, like TOTALIZE, was effectively over without the long sought-after goal of Falaise being captured.

A *Hitlerjugend* MG 42 team. The gunner with his back to us has a pistol as his personal weapon and also carries a spare gun barrel container.

Increasing numbers of *Hitlerjugend* prisoners were taken when left behind during the

withdrawal.

The following day, 16 August, Canadian operations steadily eroded the *Hitlerjugend*'s fighting strength around Point 159 and on the road to Falaise. Kurt Meter later wrote:

> Fighter-bombers dived on the little patch of woods at Bois du Roi, unleashing their rockets into the long-destroyed woods. Some panzers east of Point 159 fell victim to the Typhoon attacks. I met Max Wünsche between Versainville and Point 159. He told me of the hopeless situation on the hill. Enemy tanks were racing towards us. Their rounds exploded on the road; Max Wünsche disappeared. I felt a burning hot pain, shrapnel had opened up my scalp and I dived headfirst into a hedge … My *Kübelwagen* had gone and Max Bornhoft was no longer to be seen. I was alone …
>
> The tanks moved closer and closer. I crawled along the ditch to get out of the enemy's axis of advance. The Shermans were in action against panzers occupying a good position on a reverse slope. This had to be Max Wünsche's work. Tank rounds screamed overhead.
>
> I did not believe my eyes; Max Bornhoft had returned, and I desperately waved at him. Under the cover of the panzer's fire, he raced down the road, which could be seen along its entire length, as it ran across the enemy's front. Shells exploded all around Max but that didn't stop him … I was waiting in the ditch, ready to leap into the *Kübelwagen* and like lightning we were back on the reverse slope. Wünsche welcomed me and confirmed that he had directed the tanks' fire. My wound was dressed, and I continued the battle with a half-shaved head and a couple of stitches.

Wünsche and Meyer.

With the news that further west the 1st Polish Armoured Division was attacking Jort on the Dives, Point 159, which had been fiercely defended, was abandoned during the afternoon and the survivors moved back to the Aute sector. After dark, the division, now reduced to just fifteen operational panzers, pulled back some 3 miles to a position on the Ante stream centred on Dambainville.

Meanwhile, beyond the division's right flank the Polish Armoured Division attack had secured a bridgehead across the River Dives. The remnants of the Reconnaissance Battalion, *Kampfgruppe* Wienecke, and several *Panzerjäger* from Monts d'Éraines were ordered to redeploy eastwards by Headquarters I SS Panzer Corps to help the 85th Division contain the enemy. This was, however, the direction in which the main threat would develop over the coming days. Montgomery now directed II Canadian Corps' two armoured divisions further east on Trun as the prospect of enveloping and destroying the German armies in a pocket east of Falaise

developed, as British divisions and the US First and Third Armies raced east.

The division's *Panzerjäger* were defending the line of the Ante. Here an example of a disadvantage of removing the muzzle brake from the *Jagdpanzer* 75mm IV's gun is afforded by the account of a commander who engaged a Canadian tank at maximum range but could not see the fall of shot because of smoke. This was probably due to the absence of a muzzle brake which would have dispersed the smoke to left and right more readily.[5]

Also on the line of the Ante covering Dambainville, the surviving Panthers of 2 and 3 Companies were strung out in defence, as recorded by their company commander *Leutnant* Pohl:

> By orders of the regiment the Company (three panzers) relocated southwards and occupied new positions some 600 metres south of Epancy, on both sides of Point 117. The sector to be secured by the 3 tanks extended almost 2km through partly broken terrain.
>
> The panzer of *Unterscharführer* Zund stood near the farmstead of Le Val and was engaged in heavy fighting with British [Canadian] infantry and tanks in the morning. *Unterscharführer* Zund knocked out a truck towing an antitank gun, then a Sherman tank. After this, Zund, together with his weak infantry support, amidst broken terrain, was encircled by four enemy tanks, of which the latter he presumably did not know anything. I ordered *Unterscharführer* Zund to break out of this encirclement, which he carried out when the four enemy tanks were covered in smoke and were blinding themselves. Following the successful breakthrough *Unterscharführer* Zund destroyed another enemy tank from a distance of 50–60 metres. My panzer was positioned in the centre of my front-line sector, from which position I could control most of it. Heavy artillery fire in this sector all day.
>
> A Tiger, which was positioned a little to the right of my panzer, withdrew in the afternoon without having informed me; thus it was towards the evening my panzer was engaged from all sides. After I enquired from the Tiger and was assured that I was alone in this sector, I asked the Tiger tank to provide fire support, with the help of which I would be able to free myself from the encirclement. However, the Tiger had established its new position so far back that this was impossible, and

I was forced to break out without the fire support of the Tiger. At top speed we broke through the encirclement and moving in zigzag lines, along our main battle line, we were able to reach the protection of a wood, to the utmost amazement of the enemy tanks. An anti-tank gun which was firing at us from Epancy was put out of action by the first shot of the Tiger tank located far on the right. Following the successful breakthrough, I set alight an enemy tank that was positioned some 2,000 metres away and firing intensively.

The red-brown, green and sand-coloured camouflage paint is enhanced by vegetation.

Obersturmbannführer Max Wünsche in the turret of a Panther.

Falaise: 16–18 August

While the rest of General Simonds' corps were directed to the south-east, the 2nd Canadian Division was now left to secure the town of Falaise, which had on the night of 12/13 August already been largely reduced to rubble. This bomber strike was to prevent the Germans using the good road through the town in their eastward withdrawal, the authorization of which had been von Kluge's final order as C-in-C West.[6]

Even though the *Hitlerjugend* had barred the way south down the N158 to II Canadian Corps, further west, tanks of XII Corps had broken through and by the end of 15 August were only just over a mile from Falaise. Consequently, the 150-man-strong *Kampfgruppe* Krause, with the remnants of the Escort Company and a pair of Tigers under command prepared positions on the old town walls covering the front from north-west to north-east, with two 75mm guns covering roads into the town.

The British divisions were diverted further south, leaving the 4th Canadian

Infantry Brigade to secure the high ground to the west of Falaise and the 6th Brigade to attack the town from the north-west, supported by two squadrons of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers and three field artillery regiments. The operation was scheduled for 1300 hours on 16 August, but with the change of the corps axis to the south-east, the brigade found itself a lower priority and crossing the line of traffic moving to the front, all of which afforded more time for the *Hitlerjugend*'s defensive preparations. Consequently, the advance on Falaise did not begin until between 1500 and 1545 hours, when Krause's men and Tigers deployed as outposts started to fall back towards the town, having inflicted casualties on the Canadians.

Heavily outnumbered, all the *Hitlerjugend* could do was delay the enemy and inflict as many casualties as possible. *Sturmmann* Rogge of the Escort Company was near the Caen-Falaise road:

> We sheltered from the usual artillery fire that warned of attack, in dugouts we had burrowed into the rubble around the houses. Shortly afterwards we could hear the boom of the Tiger's cannons and the rattle of machine guns to our front. Soon several casualties came past us, followed by the grenadiers at the run and then one of the Tigers. We could see the black smoke of burning enemy tanks and then it was our turn. The Pak [75mm anti-tank gun] covering the road to our right fired. I couldn't see the target, but it must have been a hit as there was more smoke.[7]
>
> The Canadian infantry started to come forward. A machine gun in the remains of a house above me halted them but tank cannon-fire brought the building down along with a comrade. We were few and the Canadians were going around us. To escape capture, we moved back into the streets, but I was hit and managed to crawl away from the tracks of an enemy tank and I was taken prisoner.

Canadians advance into Falaise.

The South Saskatchewans' war diary records that this first phase was quickly completed, despite heavy machine-gun and mortar fire. *Sturmmann* Decker of *Kampfgruppe* Krause was also falling back from the western outskirts:

> I remember moving along the street and they were shooting at us. At that time, Falaise was almost entirely occupied by the Canadians. As we were running down the street the bullets were passing between our legs. We went up and over the rooftops of some of the houses to escape.

As the Canadians advanced into Falaise with tanks slowed by rubble and bomb craters, they blasted resistance with high-explosive shells and approached the river, where at the one standing bridge they were confronted by a dug-in tank and a roadblock. Here the Canadians were halted until the two assault battalions secured bridgeheads between 1930 and 2030 hours, when they resumed their advance to the eastern outskirts of the town, 'which

was full of snipers and MG posts'. The survivors of *Kampfgruppe* Krause fell back to buildings centred on a school and isolated they fought on as the Canadians bypassed them. *Sturmmann* Decker was one of those in the school:

> I ended up in a building with a view right down the street. Most of the others were in the main school building. There were about eighty of us altogether, but I only saw the few men who were immediately around me. I remember the nuns bringing us something to drink. We had no food, but there was an orchard there and we ate green apples. Sleep was impossible. During the course of the fighting, contact between our various groups located in different buildings throughout the school complex proved extremely difficult.
>
> We had a lot of wounded in the basement of the main building. Our medic told me that he had a Canadian PoW helping him, and that they looked after the wounded together. There was another Canadian there, badly wounded; he would have died had he not got proper medical care. The medic made a white flag from a piece of bed sheet and put a red cross on it, and we carried the wounded Canadian out into the middle of the street. The Canadians who were in the houses on the opposite side of the street could see this. We left the man there with our medic and the Canadians came out, but in addition to taking their wounded comrade, they decided to take our medic prisoner. For a moment it looked as if someone was going to shoot him. He managed to break away and came back to us where he continued caring for our wounded.

The body of an *Unterscharführer* photographed in Falaise. Like all officers and senior NCOs transferred from the *Leibstandarte*, he is wearing that division's cuff title. The *Hitlerjugend* cuff title was only issued after Normandy.

During the first evening of fighting in Falaise a couple of soldiers were sent in a panic to report to Krause at his command post near the station to tell him that they were being attacked by black soldiers. In a conversation one of the authors, a veteran *Hitlerjugend* panzer commander, told how he had his throat cut by 'black soldiers' while sleeping under an apple tree in an orchard one night. His assailants were later proved to be a Canadian patrol with

heavily blackened faces. Krause calmed the soldiers down with schnapps and led a counter-attack using the twenty soldiers of his headquarters to restore the situation and confidence at the school.

Kurt Meyer wrote in *Sturmbannführer* Krause's citation for the Knight's Cross that

> During the fighting in Falaise he mastered a desperate situation through tough steadfastness and self-sacrifice, standing firm with a handful of men while defending an urban block that had been encircled by the enemy. Only after being repeatedly ordered to do so did he break through the attacking forces and fight his way back towards La Hoguette.

That evening Krause broke out from Falaise with such men as he could reach and escape with and reached the Escort Company's positions. The fight for Falaise, however, lasted for two days and into a second night. *Sturmmann* Decker was among the soldiers left behind in the school:

> At one point a Canadian jeep came along the road and stopped by the building we were in. Of course, the driver didn't know we were there. I remember one of us threw something at the jeep and off they went. The Canadians tried to blast us out of the building by bringing up a tank, with infantry behind it. One of our lads had a *Panzerfaust*, which he fired and damaged the tank; they had to get another tank to tow the damaged one backwards down the street!

After a day of resisting all attempts by the Fusiliers Mont Royal to subdue them, the survivors who had not received the order to withdraw, reduced to fewer than forty men, exfiltrated from Falaise. *Sturmmann* Decker was among them:

> We knew it would not be long before we were all caught or killed. We decided to attempt a break-out at midnight; it was the night of 17/18 August 1944. It was dark, no moon, nothing. Midnight came and we got out of the school and onto the road.

An unknown *Unterscharführer* recorded that

> We left by a side door on to the Rue des Promontères and to our great surprise all remained calm. Obviously, this side was not being watched, so we crossed the road and went up a lane. At a left turn we saw a jeep moving towards us. It slowed down and the crew opened fire at short range in the middle of our column … In the chaos that followed we ran in all directions.

At this point the column scattered. Our *Unterscharführer*, after running into some more Canadians, escaped and hid in the railway yard, while Decker recalled that

> We jumped into the houses for cover and couldn't move. We stayed there for hours.
>
> Dawn came, and just as it was getting light, we saw a German plane come over [and drop fragmentation bombs]. This was our last opportunity and, as the Canadians were nowhere to be seen, we managed to sneak through their lines. When we gathered ourselves together, there were only nineteen of us left, exhausted, hungry and we hadn't slept or had a proper drink. All we wanted to do was to have something to eat and lie down to sleep for a couple of hours, but we kept on marching, on and on, hoping to make contact with other German soldiers but without success.

Fusiliers Mont Royal infantry and a Sherman of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers closing in on the school during 17 August.

Decker and the survivors of *Kampfgruppe* Krause were, however, taken prisoner before they reached German positions.

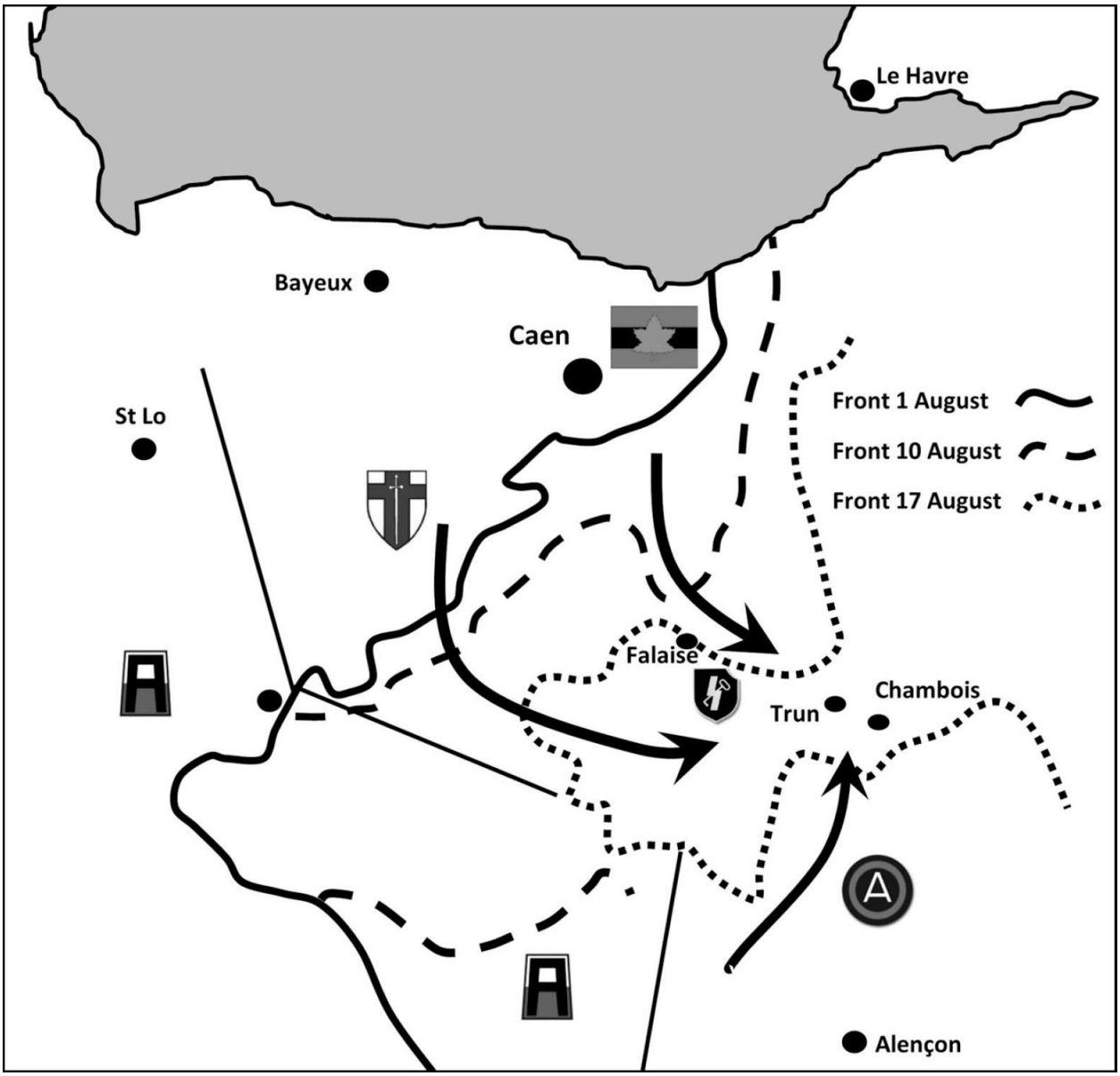
The Final Withdrawal and Break-Out

Meanwhile, what was left of the *Hitlerjugend* were in action on the northern side of what was now the rapidly-forming Falaise Pocket, as the Allies sought to encircle the remnants of the Fifth and Seventh armies, first at Trun and then at Chambois. During the 17th and 18th about half the division's surviving panzers were sent east towards the Seine to hold open the armies' line of withdrawal. Consequently, a significant number of the panzers were well to the east of Chambois when the Falaise Pocket was eventually closed on 19 August. The 4th Company reports having ten Panthers when they came under command of a *Kampfgruppe* of the 17th SS *Panzergrenadier* Division at Pacy near the Seine, while further north *Kampfgruppe* Mohnke was formed

at Acquigny, including four Panzer IVs and three Panthers.

The remainder of the division, including *Obersturmbannführer* Wünsche's company of panzers, which were still in the pocket, fell back at a rate of about 5 miles a day from the line of the Ante/Dives, doing their best to hold the enemy. *Standartenführer* Meyer described the fighting withdrawal as command and control in the German armies in Normandy disintegrated:

> I had a *Kübelwagen*, one radio truck and some dozen men to try to organise defences in all directions. There were men streaming past us by the thousand, all ranks and every type of vehicle, all under constant threat of air attack. Many hundreds were slaughtered as they tried to escape along congested roads on which the dead, dying and many horses were causing a nightmare of obstruction.[8]
>
> I was forced to go on foot with my soldiers. We were marching west when all else was moving the other way. These fugitives paid us little attention, and none stopped to enquire about the situation, and even less what could be done. I could see that although the situation appeared hopeless, with a few small groups I might be able to hold back the oncoming Allies long enough for many of this bedraggled and beaten army to escape. That is what happened, as by a miracle I found some three hundred SS men, though not all 12th SS, and organised several *Kampfgruppen*. I then led them into the best available positions from which to conduct defence and by that same evening we were in combat again with the British and Canadians. The fighting was severe, and we were forced out of our holes time and time again over several days during which we virtually lost all sense of time and date.



The development of the Falaise Pocket.

During the forty-eight hours from the 17th to the final closure of the pocket the Poles, French and American Allies were having to fight hard to make progress towards Chambois. The situation inside the Falaise Pocket for the thousands of German soldiers was recorded by the Fifth Army in its war diary:

> At exits from the pocket, as well as inside it, constant air strikes and fighter-bomber attacks, hunting down even individual men on foot, makes any movement on foot or assembly of units, for an attack by

them, impossible. Communication systems are largely destroyed.

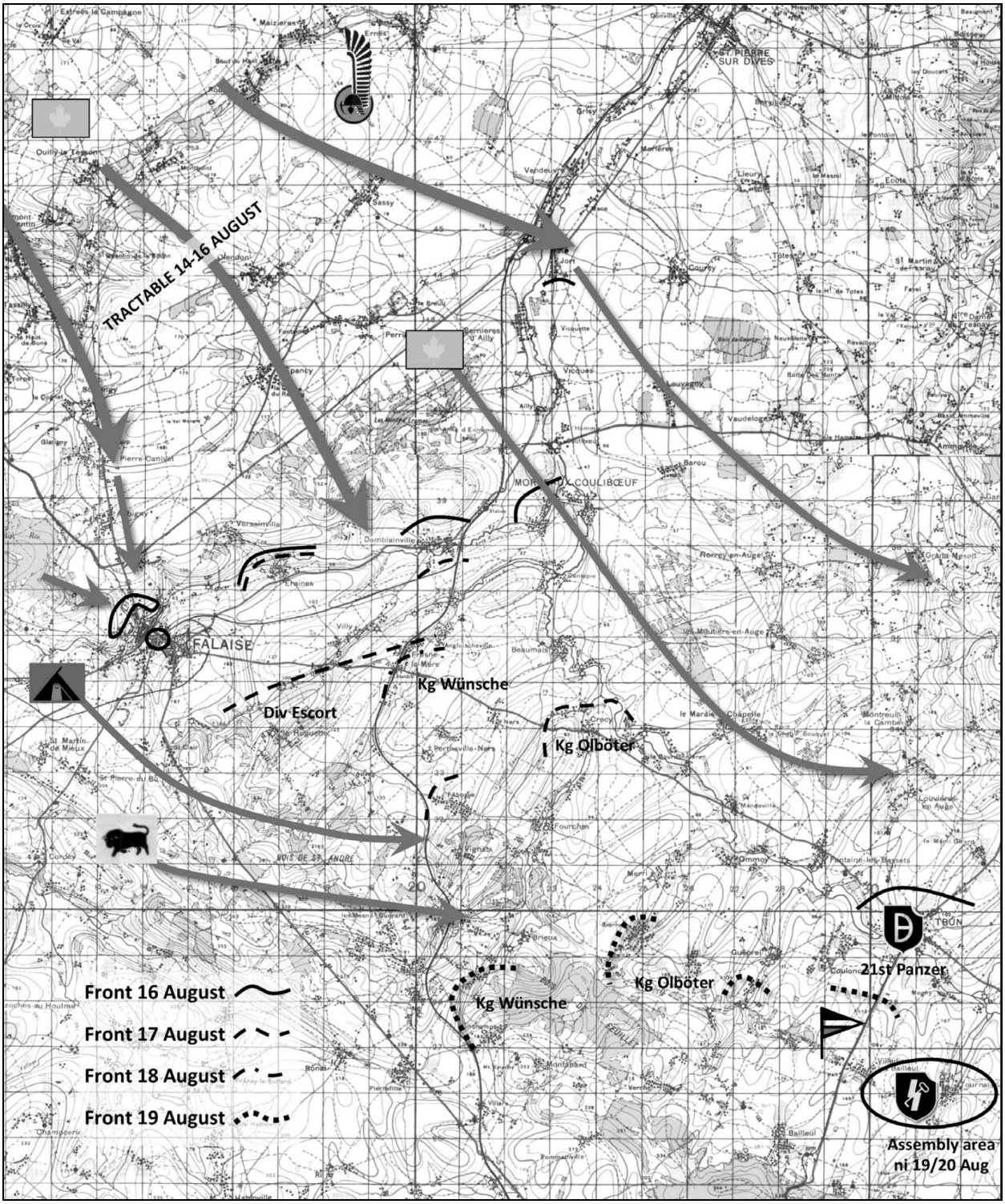
In such situations virtually all German movement was, of course, at night and in confused circumstances; clashes between *Hitlerjugend* soldiers and the Canadians were a regular occurrence. This led to the organized bodies of men becoming separated and joining the general eastward movement. Among the small groups that lay up by day was *Obersturmbannführer* Wünsche's, which had become separated from his panzers during the night of 18/19 August.[9] Most groups like these were killed or captured over subsequent days; few escaped.

On the evening of 19 August, the Allies finally closed the pocket, with between 80,000 and 100,000 German troops trapped within its shrinking perimeter. A counter-attack by II SS Panzer Corps from the east that day to keep the pocket open had been delayed due to a lack of fuel and congestion on the roads east of Chambois. Inside the pocket, what was left of the *Hitlerjugend*'s headquarters was co-located with that of General Elfeld's LXXXIV Corps at La Londe, near General Hausser's Headquarters Seventh Army.

After an examination of the situation Hausser ordered Elfeld and *Obergruppenführer* Meyer to break out in three columns of such organized troops that were still in hand. They would attack via the Polish-occupied high ground of Mont-Ormel and Point 262. The operation was to be coordinated with the delayed attack by II SS Panzer Corps, which would now take place in the early hours of 20 August. Kurt Meyer recorded the practicalities of the break-out:

> We reached our command post in a state of complete exhaustion. Command and control of the division during the break-out was impossible. The roads were completely blocked and there were no means of communications any more. The division formed into two groups.[10] Those motorized units that still existed were to break out behind the 1st SS Panzer Division via Chambois. That group was to be commanded by the divisional artillery commander, Drechsler. The divisional staff, joined by General Elfeld and the rest of *Kampfgruppe* Krause, were to follow the 3rd *Fallschirmjäger* Division. I subdivided

our group into several sections so they could act independently if need be. Guns for which there were no more prime movers were blown up at midnight.



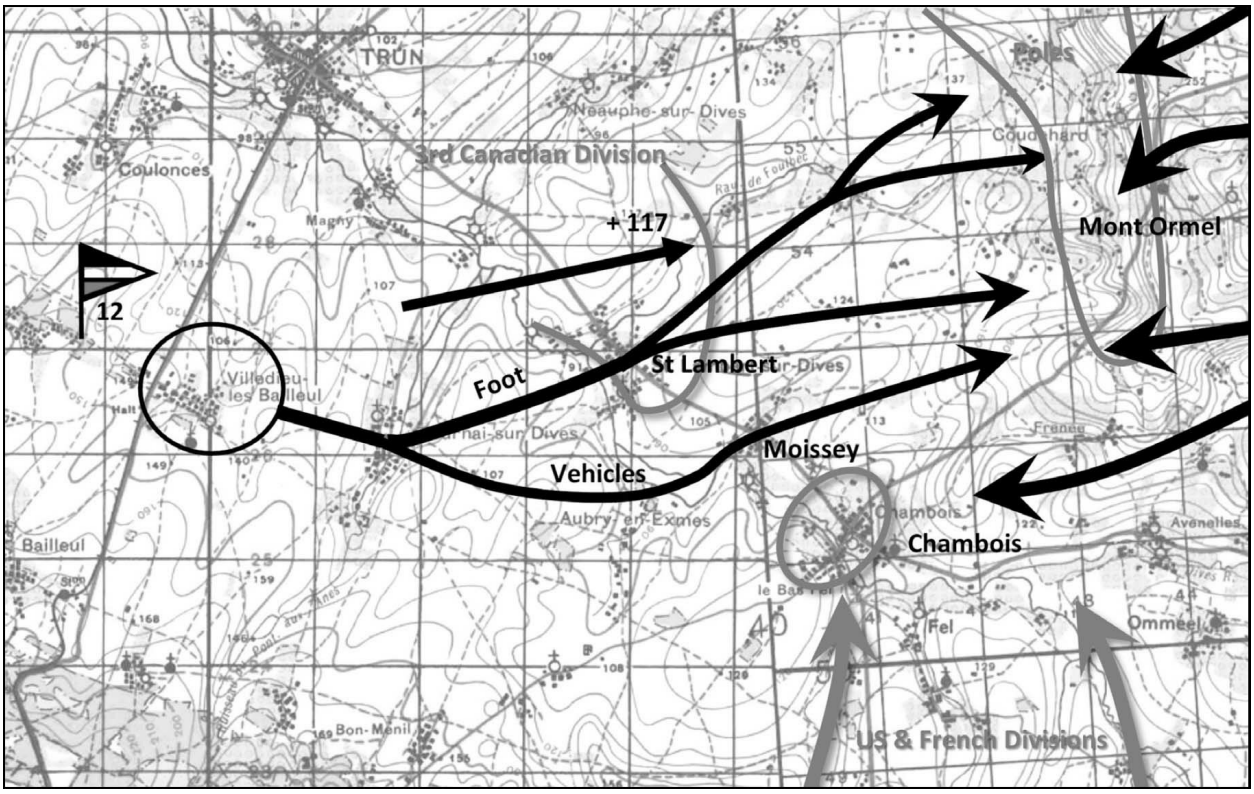
The withdrawal of the *Hitlerjugend* in the Falaise Pocket.

Hitlerjugend sheltering in a hedgerow with enemy aircraft above.

Most of the surviving soldiers of the artillery and the *Nebelwerfer* battalions were, however, not linked up with any of the columns. Consequently, of those listed as missing at the end of the break-out, the division's artillerymen formed about 50 per cent. Meyer continued:

> At midnight I had assembled all that were still in the pocket around a group of farm buildings. A liaison party was with the 3rd *Fallschirmjäger* Division. Because the reconnaissance unit did not return and no noise of fighting was heard from St Lambert, we assumed the paratroopers' break-out was a success. We started to move.

Virtually all equipment was abandoned other than personal weapons, a haversack and gas-mask tin. The *Hitlerjugend*'s part of the infantry column that totalled 2,000–3,000 assorted soldiers started to move as it got dark, needing to cross to the north of the Dives, via crossings to the west of St Lambert, by dawn. As they marched towards the Dives, *Sturmbannführer* Hubert Meyer realized that Kurt Meyer was not with the group and went back to find him. He was located thanks to his bandaged head aboard a *Leibstandarte* Panther, having become separated in the darkness.



The break-out from the Falaise Pocket.

The river was crossed, and now in daylight the column encountered Canadian tanks and infantry in St Lambert and up on the high ground south of Point 117. The South Alberta Regiment's war diary describes what happened:

> At about 0800 hours waves of German infantry began moving against the positions. It could hardly be described as an attack as there was no covering fire plan, simply a mass movement of riflemen. RHQ tanks were moved to better fire positions and began to mow down the

> advancing infantry … C Squadron in St Lambert sent back an additional 200 prisoners.

Heading for the designated divisional assembly area beyond Mont-Ormel, the survivors pressed on across some 2 miles of open country to the high ground where II SS Panzer Corps were attacking from the north-east.

On the second route, the division's vehicles followed the *Leibstandarte* north over the Dives via the ford at Moissey, which has since been referred to as the 'Corridor of Death'. In contrast with the stealthy initial phase of the infantry column's exfiltration, the armour was going to use speed to get through. The Panzer Regiment's after-action report explains that

> Gathering of the regiment was accomplished at 0300 hours in the night. After the units emptied the fuel from the trucks of other units and from the other disabled vehicles, their own vehicles were filled up. Two tanks of the company were blown up, because we were unable to tow them with us … The regimental *Kampfgruppe* departed at 0500 hours under command of *Sturmbannführer* Olböter via Bailleul-Tournai [-sur-Dives] towards St. Lambert, where we received heavy enemy defensive fire.

Their break-out has been likened to running a gauntlet of anti-tank, artillery and small-arms fire: 'The *Kampfgruppe*, with three Panthers as the spearhead, together with our soldiers and those of other divisions following us pushed through [east of] St. Lambert to break through the enemy defence along the road leading to Coudehard.'

One survivor recalled crossing the Trun-Chambois road and seeing

> … columns of burnt-out panzers and lorries on the road, some with their drivers incinerated behind their wheels. Horses and their vehicles also. All the time we were under fire from Canadian tanks in St Lambert to our left and panzer after panzer was hit and went up in flames. We didn't fire back much but concentrated on getting away from the road and into cover.

The leading elements of the armoured vehicle column headed towards Mont-Ormel but, as explained in the Panzer Regiment's report:

Directly north-east of St. Lambert extremely heavy tank, anti-tank gun, antiaircraft gun, machine-gun and artillery defensive fire hit us; because of this the attack did not succeed despite multiple attempts … After this first unsuccessful breakthrough attempt, parts of the regiment regrouped and in a single force, with other SS and Wehrmacht units, we reorganized ourselves for a renewed second attempt. That time we were able to break through the first enemy cordon.

The ford on the River Dives used by the column.

Not everyone made it through St Lambert-sur-Dives. Canadian troops round up prisoners.

However, as they started to approach the high ground north-west of Coudehard they were halted by fire, this time from the Poles in dominating fire positions:

> However, we met heavy enemy resistance on the Coudehard-La Coury de Bossy road where they had placed tanks in well-covered positions on a steeply ascending slope in order to prevent us breaking through. Some of the [enemy] armoured fighting vehicles were disabled by the *Fallschirmjager* in close combat, so the advance could be continued up the steeply ascending and extremely broken terrain. Our tank drivers especially showed outstanding achievements on the narrow roads ascending steeply, these roads also being full of damaged vehicles. Not far from reaching the hill my tank received an artillery round to its side,

though no damage was caused. Around 1700 hours we succeeded at last, our spearhead was through the enemy defence lines, and we reached the first units of the 2nd SS Panzer Division *Das Reich*.

Knocked out by air strikes concentrated over the battlefield.

That night men and vehicles from all three fragmented columns continued to slip out of the pocket, but shortly after dawn on 21 August the Allies had closed the gaps; however, there were still many members of the division at large wanting to escape. SS artilleryman Herman Bull was among them:

> Our group got smaller and smaller as we headed east past destroyed vehicles and the bodies of hundreds of men and horses. After days in the open they were smelling horribly. We walked at night, avoiding roads and noisy enemy places, as we tried to reach German territory. We were making our way along a hedge in a valley and ran into Canadians who

> opened fire on us. I was hit in the legs and the others ran. Several others who I had been with later joined me in the Canadian field hospital at Trun.

As daylight came with prospect of escape so close, German soldiers continued east. An officer of the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa, who was in the Dives valley just west of Chambois that morning with two platoons of Vickers guns, described the slaughter in which the German infantry ‘were cut down in their hundreds’:

> Caught on rising ground, there was no cover at hand for them. Those who were not hit ran towards the dead ground in the draw to their right, through which a stream runs. The attack was completely disrupted.
>
> During that brief engagement the gun numbers [crew] had been presented with just such a target as they had often wished for. All available rifles and Brens had also been in use.
>
> Until about 0800 hrs the machine-gunners fired at whatever they could see. During this time a host of white flags appeared and hundreds of the enemy crowded in to surrender. Many others were unable to give up, for every move towards our lines brought bursts of fire from certain SS troops patrolling the low ground behind them in an armoured half-track.

During this attempted break-out the commander of the 84th Infantry Division, General Menny, became a prisoner.

Still missing with a group of his soldiers, *Obersturmbannführer* Max Wünsche was among those who had been left behind in the pocket, having been as far west as the ‘Montarbard Forest’ on 20 August and therefore missed the opportunity to escape through the reopened gap. He had taken cover until nightfall when aboard a vehicle, heading east they bluffed their way through Canadian convoys and military police. Their luck ran out, however, when the vehicle ended up in a ditch and thereafter, they were on foot. Wünsche recalled that

> In the end I was down to about a dozen men; the rest were killed, captured or vanished, and I realised that we could do no more. We were

> surrounded by the enemy and I told every man to look after himself and try to break out eastwards if possible. I also told them they were free to surrender if they wished.

On foot, Wünsche and several other officers eventually ran into an Allied position during the 21st and were brought under fire. Wünsche was wounded, but he continued to evade capture, still heading for the Seine, until exhausted on the morning of the 24th. He recalled:

Ever-growing columns of prisoners made their way to Canadian and Polish PoW cages.

Destruction.

> I elected to remain in hiding and see what opportunity to escape came after dark. I felt reasonably confident I could reach German-held territory again. However, things did not go as hoped. I was hiding in some bushes in the hope of getting some sleep when I heard British soldiers combing the terrain and got down into my cover as far as I could. But it was no use, as they started firing into the undergrowth, so I was forced to reveal myself. Several Tommies ran up and searched me and I was marched before a young officer who looked over my papers before taking me off to a radio truck where I saw a senior officer who had me questioned by another man who spoke reasonable German. I was given some tea and biscuits and almost collapsed; I was that exhausted. And so began my long period as a PoW.

It is estimated that between 20,000 and 40,000 German soldiers escaped from the Falaise Pocket. Hubert Meyer states the *Hitlerjugend*'s total losses during the period 15–22 August as 948, of which 655 were listed as missing, the majority of whom were thought to be prisoners. The statistics for the

Normandy campaign are no less sobering. A total of 20,540 men left the divisional assembly area on 6 June marching for the invasion front, but by 22 August at least 8,000 of them were killed, wounded or missing. As ever, losses had been particularly heavy among the combat and combat support elements of the division.

The cost was heavy, yet the *Hitlerjugend* had done more than any other division to consistently thwart British and Canadian attempts to enlarge and break out of the beachhead, despite labouring under virtually every disadvantage imaginable. These ranged from Hitler's insistence that the battle be fought to contain the Allies within range of naval gunfire, through a perennial shortage of ammunition to a basic lack of food. Nonetheless, the commitment of the division's young soldiers to the fighting remained to the end of the Battle of Normandy. They were an implacable enemy: one that was feared and loathed by their Allied counterparts, many of whom later admitted a grudging respect for the achievements of the 12th SS Panzer Division.

For Germany's future prosecution of the war, the fact that the majority of the 12,500 *Hitlerjugend* soldiers who crossed the Seine and reached the divisional regrouping area at Fleury, east of Rouen, were the difficult and slow to train specialists, made the task of regenerating the division considerably easier.[11] Before many months were out, an Allied intelligence officer had cause to write: 'The spectre of the *Leibstandarte* and *Hitlerjugend* has been conjured phoenix-like out of the ashes of Falaise.'[12]

Even though losses of men, equipment and vehicles in the panzer and infantry regiments was grievous, enough of the division escaped for what an Allied intelligence officer described at the beginning of the battle of the Bulge as ‘the phoenix like re-emergence of the *Hitlerjugend*’.

A Panther withdrawing through the bomb-shattered ruins of Caen during 9 July 1944.

Appendix I

German Recruit Training in 1943

As the tide of war turned against Germany with longer and longer casualty lists and the surrender of the 6th Army at Stalingrad, Berlin needed to replace soldiers and expand the army. To achieve this, they needed to speed up the process and effectiveness of training soldiers for battle. In early 1943 the OKW introduced a new training regime, *Kurzausbildung* or abbreviated training, for all arms of the Wehrmacht. This placed the emphasis on the skills needed for fighting at section and crew level.

The raising of the 12th *Hitlerjugend* SS Panzer Division during 1943 is the best-known example of the *Kurzausbildung* system in action. The division's fighting qualities during the Battle of Normandy is testament to the effectiveness of this training package.

On 29 May 1943 Inspector General of Panzer Troops (*Generalinspekteur der Panzertruppen*) *Generaloberst* Heinz Guderian issued an instruction to the *Panzerwaffe* on training:

> It has been reported to me that the training of the Panzer and motorised divisions in the West does not correspond to the urgency of the situation. Therefore, I order:
>
> 1. Gunnery training is to receive the main emphasis in training on all weapons. Good results can be obtained with little ammunition.
> 2. I forbid:
>   a) Classroom exercises as opposed to combat ones.
>   b) Drill as a purpose into itself on the parade ground, the athletic field, or other areas.
>   c) Sequentially ordered and functionally separated training plans, such as 4 weeks of section-level training, 3 weeks of platoon-level

training, 1 week of company-level training and the like. Training must be multi-faceted from the beginning. The situation must not arise where the commitment of a formation before it has completed its entire training programme, consequently fights, for the first time, as a battalion.

3. Those areas in which we are known to be weak take precedence, e.g., night combat planned night-time and low-light gunnery training, fighting in woods and heavy vegetation, camouflage, etc. In this regard, I recommend training exercises and schooling of the troops according to the corresponding new OKH pamphlets.

Finally, I request that superior officers, including those of higher ranks, make sure that efficient use is made of time and that the changes of attitude occur through constant checking of the weekly training schedules.

* * *

Generaloberst Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg added his own notes to the instructions passed to Panzer Group West who was responsible for overseeing the training:

Our motto – Only that which is necessary for survival and keeping one alive in war will be included in the training: Create a field soldier – nothing else matters.

a) The location of the day's training is, first and foremost, the 'battle lane'. Time management is of equal significance. The entire training period – whether just three months or more – must be arranged as a financially and managerially experienced businessman would do. The training programme is the means by which this is accomplished. Senior officer must continuously supervise it. Programmes should be exchanged by units to stimulate thought and instruct others.
b) The objective of all recruit training is to produce an independent-thinking fighter, trained in the spirit of the hunter.
c) The 'battle run' must fulfil the requirement that it simultaneously meets the most important demands of the foot soldier in combat: firing,

camouflage, digging in and stalking. From the very beginning, those tasks must not be separated from each other or in time. They should be learned as mutually intertwined functions. The traditional firing range is, therefore, obsolete. It does not simulate the terrain. Therefore, it does not come within conceivable reach of the realities of war.

d) The *Schwerpunkt* for all training lies in good shooting that is superior to that of the enemy. That provides the best chance of survival.
e) Weapons training begins immediately with live ammunition, eliminating the traditional precursory theoretical and practical arenas (knowledge of trajectories and use of blank cartridges). After the initial firing points, it is left up to the trainee to determine whether to fire or not to fire on the battle run itself; the trainee does not know where the targets will appear, what kind of targets they are, when they will appear, how long they will be visible and at which distance they will appear.
f) Fundamental infantry training is to focus on the assault rifle, the machine pistol and the rifle equipped with telescopic sight.
g) The initial weapons training begins on the second day, whether or not outfitting with uniforms has been completed. The night training plan begins on the third day, as is the first firing in low-level light conditions with live ammunition. Blank ammunition is eliminated commencing with the start of individual training.
h) Drill and ceremonies, in every guise and under any other name, is forbidden. The troops learn essential discipline from continuous training, at the command of ‘Fall in!’ etc. The systematic progression and differentiation of first individual training, then squad training and then platoon training in the traditional sequence is forbidden. It is replaced by the so-called ‘combined training’; after a few days of instruction in individual combat, one day of squad training alternates with another day of individual training, then one day of platoon training and, again, a day of squad combat. One must see disorder and mistakes and correct them through repetition or by employing instructor groups. The guiding thought is to achieve deployable units at the lowest tactical level as rapidly as possible.

i) A significant percentage of training time, about one-third, belongs to training in night and low-level light fighting. Conditions of complete darkness, noise-free movement, night-time and low-level light firing, digging-in in silence and the vital close-quarters fighting at night are major components of the training. Twenty-five per cent of the ammunition allocation for training on all weapons is to be used for night and low-level light firing.
j) A special night-training plan forms the basis for night-time training.
k) Digging-in and camouflage are fundamental elements of battle. Both are taught according to the digging-in and camouflage lessons and the battle-ready recruit must meet the defined requirements. He must have personally dug-in and camouflaged trenches under realistic field conditions to the level of what combat requires of the individual combatant, i.e. a fire-trench, the section circular trench, the abbreviated trench [*Grabenstummel*], deflection trench, the right-angle shrapnel protection trench [*Winkeldeckungsloch*] and the like.
l) Without exception every form of battle training for the individual soldier – in the section or platoon – must be observed with the enemy point of view, through binoculars, from the enemy position. To where possible, this should be done by an observer with combat experience. The ‘enemy observer’ carries a red flag and if the flag is shown, the exercise is immediately halted. Errors are then corrected by repetition until the instructor is satisfied.
m) In all training, individual or in low-level unit battle, varying forms of competition are to be used.

HJ Div.

An SS *Sturmmann* decorated with the Iron Cross Second Class. He is probably a wounded survivor of Normandy wearing a temporary version of the Division's cuff title. His chevron is similar to the British Lance Corporal's badge. As with the full Corporal, the *Rottenführer* wore two such chevrons on his arm.

Appendix II

SS Ranks and Allied Equivalents

Waffen SS	British Army	US Army
SS-*Brigadeführer*	Brigadier	Brigadier General
SS-*Oberführer*	(not applicable)	Senior Colonel
SS-*Standartenführer*	Colonel	Colonel
SS-*Obersturmbannführer*	Lieutenant Colonel	Lieutenant Colonel
SS-*Sturmbannführer*	Major	Major
SS-*Hauptsturmführer*	Captain	Captain
SS-*Obersturmführer*	Lieutenant	1st Lieutenant
SS-*Untersturmführer*	2nd Lieutenant	2nd Lieutenant
SS-*Sturmscharführer*	Regimental Sergeant Major	Sergeant Major
SS-*Hauptscharführer*	Sergeant Major	Master Sergeant
SS-*Oberscharführer*	(not applicable)	Technical Sergeant
SS-*Scharführer*	Colour Sergeant	Staff Sergeant
SS-*Unterscharführer*	Sergeant	Sergeant
SS-*Rottenführer*	Corporal	Corporal
SS-*Sturmmann*	Lance Corporal	(not applicable)
SS-*Oberschütze*	(not applicable)	Private 1st Class
SS-*Mann*	Private	Private

MG42 gunner *Oberschütze* Günter Strelow of 25 *Panzergrenadiers*. He was killed on 11 June and is buried at La Cambe.

Survivors of the 25th *Panzergrenadier*'s Pioneer Company left behind after the withdrawal from Caen are rounded up by Canadian troops.

Notes

Chapter 1: Raising and Training the Division

1. Britain had adopted such measures on the outbreak of war in 1939. The Nazis, looking over their shoulders at the civil collapse in 1918, had been reluctant to impose such stringent measures on their population until necessary in 1943. Even then, society and the population and economy were not completely mobilized until they stared defeat in the face in September 1944.
2. Meyer, Kurt, *Grenadiers* (J.J. Fedorwicz, 2001).
3. G2 (Counter-Intelligence) HQ SHAFE. The *Hitlerjugend* (The Hitler Youth Movement). January 1945.
4. Guderian, Heinz, *Panzer Leader* (Penguin Classic, 2000). Hitler distrusted his generals and wanted to be as independent as possible from the army with its old Prussian traditions. Guderian believed that the Führer wanted to create his own SS Praetorian Guard.
5. These ‘camps’ were a variety of existing Nazi boarding schools and institutions across Germany.
6. Gerhard Rempel, *Hitler’s Children: The Hitler Youth and the SS* (University of North Carolina Press, 1989).
7. The *Heer* [Army] eventually provided 50 officers as its share of the 400.
8. G2 (Counter-Intelligence) HQ SHAFE. The *Hitlerjugend* (The Hitler Youth Movement). January 1945. This document lists hundreds of such institutions, which had been set up to develop and train future leaders for party and the Nazi state at local, regional and national level.
9. Today this area is a nature reserve and the ‘tank scrapes’ and trenches can still be clearly seen.
10. Promoted to *Obersturmbannführer* on appointment to command of the 12th SS Panzer Regiment.
11. General Geyr von Schweppenburg, Commander Panzer Group West during the division’s training developed and delivered Guderian’s concepts across his divisions including, as Meyer indicates, the *HJ*.
12. There were damaged Panzer IVs, plus three knocked-out Panzer IIIs initially suitable

only for ‘dry’ crew training. They were all recovered from the Kharkov battlefields, where I SS Panzer Corps had fought in the spring of 1943, and eventually repaired.
13. The *HJ* was raised on the Type 43 SS Panzer Division Establishment.
14. Interview with the authors.
15. Foreign Armies West had grossly inflated/overestimated the number of formations available to the Anglo-American Allies as some seventy divisions, which thanks to Operation FORTITUDE was approximately twice the real number. Their assessment included up to eight airborne divisions, which would be employed operationally in depth.
16. *Feldmarschall* Rommel commanded Army Group B, including the Seventh and Fifteenth Armies, but crucially did not have direct command of Panzer Group West.
17. The Panzer Regiment complete, III/26 *Panzergrenadiers* and self-propelled artillery battalion.

Chapter 2: The Invasion

1. *Der Freiwillige* (1963).
2. Hansmann recalls the landing sequence wrongly. The first vehicles on the beaches were the amphibious Duplex Drive Shermans with propellers and tracks. Next came the breaching teams of the 79th Armoured Division and obstacle-clearance engineers and then the infantry.
3. Working on the FuG 12 medium-wave command set at the distance back to his battalion headquarters, at full power of 80 watts, using Morse code they could just be in range. To support a distant recce task, however, rebroadcast stations were routinely deployed.
4. HMS *Emerald*, a light cruiser (5 × 6″ guns) was assigned to the bombardment of the three batteries on the ridge leading inland to Ryes. The bunkers were the battalion HQ of I/916 Infantry Regiment of the 352nd Division.
5. Dropped further inland at the same time as the airborne divisions, the SAS patrols along with 400 Ruperts successfully drew or at least spread German attention away from the immediate invasion coast by, for instance, simulating an airborne drop north of the Seine. This was credible as, thanks to Operation FORTITUDE, the Germans believed that the Allies had up to eight airborne divisions!
6. Made that much worse as the 6th Airborne Division was astride the Seventh/Fifteenth Army boundary.
7. SS *Oberführer* Fritz Krämer, a former army officer, was Dietrich’s chief of staff in I SS Panzer Corps.
8. Interview with the authors.
9. So effective were the Allied interdiction sorties that Fritz Krämer (chief of staff, I SS Panzer Corps) concluded ‘Already it is apparent that men and vehicles could be saved from destruction only by restricting daylight movement and moving at night with dimmed lights.’

10. The same area was subsequently used by Witt for his divisional headquarters.
11. Schulman, Milton, *Defeat in the West* (1947).
12. As only one battery of the *Hitlerjugend*'s *Nebelwerfers* had transport to move forward with the division, the 7th Battalion of the 83rd *Werfer* Regiment was attached.
13. The Sd.Kfz.15 was the 464 Horsch command car, which could be fitted with radios. It was probably one of the types of vehicle issued to the *HJ*'s various headquarters following the command post exercise at Dieppe during the spring.
14. The general feeling was that companies of seventeen Panzer IVs were unwieldy; by reducing the number to twelve per company, a 9th Company was formed in II Battalion.
15. War diary of the 12th SS Panzer Regiment.
16. The Panzer IV Austf J and H mounted the KwK40 L/48 gun.
17. Interview with the authors, 2010.
18. Stacey, Colonel C.P., *The Victory Campaign* (Ottawa, 1966).
19. The *Panzerfaust* or 'Panzer Fist' was a hand-held rocket with a shaped-charge warhead.
20. The 16th Company was the Panzer Pioneers; the 15th Company was a reconnaissance company, which is not shown on the official Order of Battle return of 1 June 1944. Also not shown are the division's seven Panzer IIs, probably former training vehicles, which were deployed around the 12th SS Panzer Regiment as additional utility vehicles. These assets were possibly hidden with the manpower stolen from the divisional replacement organization.
21. Shulman was seconded to MI 14b, which produced Orders of Battle of German formations for use in the field.
22. The initial objectives of the attack were the villages just over 4 miles north of the 25th *Panzer-grenadiers*' forming-up places.

Chapter 3: The *Hitlerjugend* in Action

1. The German soldiers' nickname for Allied fighter-bombers.
2. Dietrich as regimental, divisional and now corps commander was notorious for exaggerating successes and minimizing setbacks!
3. The 130th *Panzer Lehr* (Panzer Teaching) Division had been formed from the demonstration troops of the German panzer schools at Münster Lager and Wünsdorf in 1943.
4. This was a part of the 8th Armoured Brigade's drive south via Point 103, which had been planned for the afternoon and evening of D-Day. The 24th Lancers and the Inns of Court Yeomanry (I Corps' Recce Regiment) were ordered to cover the left flank and the gap between the 3rd Canadian and 50th divisions. Further west, the 7th Armoured Division would also be advancing south.
5. Hubert Meyer only mentions the six 75mm from the battalion's heavy company, but each of the three infantry companies (9th, 10th and 11th) had a pair of their own. It is reasonable to assume that such a significant asset would not have been left out of

action.

6. Brouay is spelled ‘Bronay’ on the contemporary Allied maps and is one of many cartographic errors made in copying French maps.
7. The Auster was known to the Germans as the ‘Eisner Tommy’ or the ‘Iron Tommy’ due to it being seemingly impervious to anti-aircraft fire, despite its slow speed. One reason is that the German anti-aircraft shell passed through the canvas skin without detonating.
8. The cruisers HMS *Ajax* (8 × 6″), *Argonaut* (10 × 5.25″) and *Orion* (866″) were firing in support.
9. The field regiments RCA of the 3rd Canadian Division were issued with American M7 105mm self-propelled guns, known to the British as the Priest because of the ‘pulpit’ for the .50 Browning machine gun.

Chapter 4: Attack and Defence

1. Rudolf von Ribbentrop was the son of the Foreign Minister of Nazi Germany. He insisted that his son be given no favours and earn any promotion on pure merit. He had been on his way to hospital and Germany and called in to say goodbye to his company and stayed to watch the attack.
2. The APDS round was issued after pre-invasion training was complete. Consequently, there are numerous examples, including at Arnhem, where a lack of training led to underperformance of this highly effective round. The 6-pounder (57mm) APDS was generally as effective as the Germans’ 75mm gun.
3. Canadian historians disagree about the presence of tanks delivered by the 25th Armoured Delivery Regiment (Elgin Regiment), but C Squadron landed on the 8th and was rushed forward to reinforce the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade’s regiment.
4. ‘Co-opting’ in this manner was not unusual in the chaos of battle. At the other end of the invasion front *Oberst* von der Hydte, 6th *Fallschirmjäger* Regiment, got into trouble for doing the same with a large number of 17th SS *Panzergrenadier* soldiers. Biermann remained with the 3rd Company and earned an Iron Cross for knocking out an Allied tank with a *Panzerfaust*.
5. Gundlach, Willi, *Die 3. Kompanie. Zeitgeschichte* (2015 edition).
6. It sounds as if the anti-tank mines were to be fired electronically and used in the manner of a Claymore.
7. Meyer.
8. *Ibid*.
9. On the right half of the map the inverted crossed hockey-stick markings show anti-glider poles.
10. Decker, Karl-Heinz, *Hitler’s Teenage Warriors*, ed. Wilson, James (Short Run Press).
11. Holder of the Knight’s Cross of the Iron Cross.
12. US post-war interviews with German commanders. *Fighting in Normandy*, ed. David Isby (Green-hill, 2001).

13. Interview with the authors.
14. The Radio Intercept Section of the Signals Battalion had four sets for listening in to enemy voice transmissions. These sets were deployed forward to ‘harvest’ conversations over the short-range VHF radios of the day. The raw intelligence was sent back to their translators and on to divisional headquarters for action.
15. Claims of tanks knocked out were usually over-inflated, often by a factor of two!
16. The Allied calculations of manpower casualties prior to the campaign resulted in serious underestimation of the number of Battle Casualty Replacements that would be needed. The normal two planning figures used by the staff for offensive action, ‘Normal’ and ‘Intense’, had to be supplemented by ‘Double Intense’.
17. Of its forty-five Tigers, fifteen were knocked out (unrecoverable/unrepairable) in the first month of the battle. In addition, serviceability was an increasing problem due to poor mechanical reliability and lack of spare parts. It is estimated that at any one time 60 per cent of the Tigers were in either in short- or long-term repair in this battalion alone.
18. Decker.
19. The process of adjusting fire by bracketing indicates that this was observed indirect fire, in this case with an air observation post adjusting the ship’s fire. It is possible that the headquarters may have been within range of a cruiser’s guns, with this sector being supported by HMS *Frobisher* (7.5″), *Mauritius, Arethusa, Dragon* and *Danae* (all 6″), but it is much more likely to have been 15″ or 16″ shells. These would have easily been within range and – more importantly – accurate range. Allowing for the cruisers being a mile or two offshore, the 6″ would have been at maximum range and less than accurate. Thus, the shells probably came from the battleships *Nelson* (16″) or *Ramillies* (15″) or the monitor *Roberts* (15″). The latter returned to Portsmouth at some point on 14 June, but a matelot’s memoir records that HMS *Ramillies* fired twenty-five rounds of 15″ on 14 June ‘at some German camp’.
20. Interview with the authors.
21. On both of these occasions British radio direction-finding sections had identified the location of the two headquarters that were bombarded.

Chapter 5: Fighting EPSOM

1. Resistance action, air attack and the SAS Operation BULBASKET all contributed to the delays.
2. III Flak Corps was deployed in its primary role of air defence. When deployed in the anti-tank role by ground commanders, these orders were frequently countermanded as a result of a phone call to Göring, as Sepp Dietrich complained on several occasions that ‘Every time I reposition flak, someone moves it back!’ The 88mm guns’ secondary role was to provide indirect fire due to a shortage of GHQ heavy artillery units. Because of their range, artillery support could be provided without moving forward from their flak positions, 2 to 3 miles behind the front line. The batteries behind II/26

Panzergrenadiers were most likely from the 1st *Flaksturm* Regiment.

3. This battalion, 7th Duke of Wellington's Regiment had suffered so badly that its commanding officer believed that it was finished as a fighting force; Montgomery disagreed!
4. The Germans, unlike the British, produced the 'sticky bomb'. The weapon described is the HHL-3 *Hafthohlladung* magnetic anti-tank mine, known to the German soldiers as the *Panzerknacker* ('Armour Breaker') as used by Emil Durr during Operation EPSOM. German panzers were covered with a plaster-like substance called Zimmerit to defeat such magnetic AT mines, but was abandoned in September 1944 when it was realized that none of the Allies had magnetic mines!
5. As in the First World War, the Germans had persistent vermin problems but the British Second Army, thanks to well-organized RAOC mobile bath and laundry units, were on top of the problem.
6. War Diary Panzer Group West. Appx 13, dated 24 June.
7. Montgomery's directive M 502 dated 18 June and M 504 dated 19 June.
8. I Battalion was the self-propelled battalion of the artillery regiment having two batteries of 66Wespe 105mm guns and one battery of Hummel 150mm guns. The observation platoon was missing the two established Panzer IIIs.
9. Captain Keeble of 1/4th KOYLI recorded that one of his platoons ran away twice during the attack and defence of Tessel Wood.
10. The 24th Lancers confirm that two Panthers were knocked out and abandoned.
11. Von Ribbentrop witnessed an incident when a Panther was hit on the front armour without penetrating, but the heat generated caused the steering box oil to ignite. This was a persistent problem with the tank.
12. A reporter and part of the division's Propaganda (PK) Company.
13. Churchill tanks of the 31st Tank Brigade were in support of the 15th Scottish Division, with attached Crocodiles of 141 (Buffs) Regiment RAC.
14. Lieutenant Ernest Harvey and the rest of his crew are listed as missing, presumably as it was common practice for captured Crocodile crews to be killed. However, in 1992 Emil Durr's legs were found and buried in his grave at La Cambe.
15. This phobia got so bad that Brigadier Carver of the 4th Armoured Brigade banned the word 'sniper' and insisted that 'isolated riflemen' be used instead.
16. Number of Gewehr 43 issued per company was nineteen, with ten having telescopic sights.
17. Gilbert, John, *Bouron, Bloody Bouron: Canada's D-Day and D+1*.
18. Interview with the authors.
19. *Unterscharführer* Junge was in fact an *Obersturmführer*. Having been a valet and subsequently an ADC to Hitler and married to Hitler's secretary Traudl, he was inexperienced and was not regarded as a 'proper officer'. Consequently, he was acting as a tank commander with no higher responsibilities. He had asked to leave Hitler's service as he realized that he was 'stifled by the atmosphere around the Führer and

wanted his mind back'. Volunteering for the front was his only way out.

20. Seigel's four Panzer IVs were reported as Tigers. Six Tigers were in support of the division on 27 June, but they were further south on the main road near Grainville.
21. 'LAH' *Leibstandarte* Adolf Hitler, aka the 1st SS Panzer Division.
22. Joining the tanks were the machine-gun battalions of the 15th Scottish and 43rd Wessex divisions which fired indirect machine-gun barrages during the day.
23. Close, Major Bill, *A View from the Turret* (Dell & Bredon, 2002).
24. Bittrich had taken over command of II SS Panzer Corps when his successor Paul Hauser took over Seventh Army. He was the first SS officer to be given command of an army.

Chapter 6: The Battle for Caen

1. This battalion had four batteries each of four guns. Three of them had 150mm *Schwere Feldhaubitze* 18 guns (the same guns mounted in I Battalion's *Hummels*) and one battery had *Schwere* 100mm *Kanone*.
2. The *Wurfkorper Spreng* were similar in appearance to *Nebelwerfer* rounds but were launched from individual wooden or metal crates called *packkiste*. The 28mm version contained high explosive and had a range of 2,337 yards. The 32mm *Wurfkorper* MFL 50 contained a napalm-like filling, a mixture of petrol and diesel oil, but being heavier it had a reduced range of 2,217 yards. In order that multiple rockets could be fired in pairs, at two-second intervals, a wooden or metal frame (*Wurfrahmen* 40/41) was available for the warheads, but accuracy was not good; their effect was, however, devastating!
3. The strength returns would indicate that I Battalion was up to strength with Panthers on 1 June 1944, but it was German practice to take panzers on strength when they were dispatched from the factory. Some of these tanks may have been vehicles that were returned to the factories for a complete rebuild.
4. Some 15 per cent of the bombs were to have delayed-action fuses timed to go off at the Allied H-hour of 0420 the following morning.
5. The British shelled Caen and its bridges from the invasion through to the capture of the city and the Germans from 8 July until they were driven back out of range during Operation TOTALIZE in August.
6. The bombing was further south than intended due to the proximity of the Allied front line and the tendency as a raid went on for aircraft to 'bomb back', hence the caution.
7. St Georges' church inside the castle has been repaired and is open to the public.
8. British sources claim thirteen 'tank kills' in this area during 8 July, principally by the M10 tank destroyers. The 4th Panzer Company, however, records that three Panthers were hit 'without effect'.
9. There are documentary indications, confirmed by this account, that the half-tracks previously only found in Olböter's III/26 *Panzergrenadiers*, were now being issued to both of the III Battalions of the division's infantry regiments. This was happening

elsewhere in the *Panzerwaffe*.

10. *Kompanie-kameradenschaft. Die 3. Kompanie* (Edition *Zeitgeschichte*).
11. *Hauptmann* Steiger was one of those Wehrmacht officers attached to the division and was the holder of a Knight's Cross. Recently his gas-mask container came to light in farm buildings south-east of Caen. Interestingly, it is named on the inside with both his army and SS ranks. Later he was taken prisoner, but his wife was mistakenly told that he was killed.
12. *Kompanie-kameradenschaft*.
13. These 'awesomely destructive guns' were not only generally on a par with the 88mm Pak 43, but more abundant in the Order of Battle as well.
14. Eventually Panzer Group West acknowledged the situation and authorized the withdrawal, but with the usual caveat that this was 'only to be in the face of superior enemy'.
15. His memory is at fault here, as 5 DCLI only took the orchard after dark that night. The Wessex Division's advance had been halted on the line of the road 500 yards north of the orchard. They probably attacked a battalion of the Wiltshire Regiment and Churchills, which were on the eastern portion of the broad plateau of Hill 112.

Chapter 7: Operations South of Caen

1. These figures are based on contradictory and incomplete records, but the higher figure is a total reported by Chief of Staff Panzer Group West 6 June-18 July. Differences in the way casualties were recorded give a higher figure for German casualties over Allied ones.
2. On 1 August 1944 Sepp Dietrich requested the 2,000 soldiers in the 'Replacement Battalion' be sent to Normandy. It would appear that these *HJ* were also sent to the under-strength *Leibstandarte*.
3. A further twenty-one panzers were in the repair organization; total thirty-one.
4. II Battalion was to pick up thirty-six Pz IVs from the *Nibelungenwerke*, Sankt Valentin at Linz was one of the main producers of Panzer IVs throughout the war.
5. It has long been axiomatic that the *Hitlerjugend* did not receive replacement men or equipment during the battle, but this is not so. There are references to small issues of both men and equipment in war diaries, but in nothing like the quantities available to the Allies. Such issues were in some cases replacements, in others they were parts of the division that had not been battle-ready but on strength or returning from the medical organization.
6. Hubert Meyer.
7. The shortage of infantry meant that Olböter was rarely under command of Wünsche.
8. The Anti-Tank Battalion consisted of two companies of 75mm *Jagdpanzers* and a company of twelve towed Pak 40 75mm guns.
9. War diary, II/12 SS Panzer Regiment, 16 July 44. It is impossible that these were a part of the thirty-six crews Hubert Meyer refers to as being dispatched to Linz on 13 July.

These panzers were crewed by replacements from Riga, who collected the panzers from Linz.

10. This battalion was commanded by Major Becker, who had overseen the conversion of 1940-vintage French armour into effective self-propelled batteries, mounting German 75mm anti-tank guns and 105mm artillery pieces. The combination of the two vehicles proved to be very effective.
11. Jackson, G.S., *Operations of Eighth Corps* (St Clements, 1948).
12. Also known to the Americans as 'Screaming Meemies' and '*Heulende kuh*' to the Germans.
13. Meyer, H., Jackson, G.S. and Boscowen, *Armoured Guardsmen* (Pen & Sword, 2001).
14. Meyer, H.
15. *Sturm Abteilung* 217 was equipped with *Sturmpanzer* IVs (assault panzers known as *Brummbä*), which mounted a ?150mm StuH 43 L/12 gun.
16. This was known as the *freigleiderung* system or the 'flexible organization' and was Guderian's idea to save mainly officers and NCOs but vehicles and drivers as well. The establishment was reduced by approximately 20 per cent in all the division's combat units. The *Sturmgewehr* 44 assault rifle, which was designed to increase firepower to cover the reduction in manpower, had yet to be issued in any meaningful numbers in the west.

Chapter 8: Operation TOTALIZE

1. The 89th Infantry Division had been re-formed in Norway where, alongside training, it carried out occupation duties. It had a long tortuous journey to Normandy, when it was finally realized that the Allies were not going to invade Norway.
2. The Polish Armoured Division was principally made up of Polish troops that had escaped from France in 1940 and topped up with escapees from occupied Europe and the Wehrmacht.
3. This may well have been one of the turretless Cromwell tanks that the *Hitlerjugend* were using as recovery vehicles.
4. The headquarters was established in a narrow gorge between Tombeau de Marie Joly and La Brèche au Diable, which was difficult to bomb or shell.
5. *Obersturmbannführer* Wilhelm Mohnke, commander of the 26th SS *Panzergrenadier* Regiment. Later he commanded the *Leibstandarte* in the Ardennes and was the last commander of the Berlin Garrison in April 1945.
6. 'Monty's Moonlight' was the nickname for the use of searchlights to illuminate the area in front of troops by bouncing the beams off clouds.
7. German practice was that the commander gave an outline of the plan, leaving the chief of staff at the main headquarters to produce its detail and orders. This enabled the commander to be forward with his tactical headquarters. The British and Canadian commanders spent far more time in their headquarters overseeing the detailed planning and writing orders.

8. I SS Panzer Corps' Escort Company was also grouped with this force.
9. *Sturmbannführer* Westernhagen, the commander of 101 Schwere Panzer Battalion had been taken ill and *Hauptsturmführer* Michael Wittmann had taken his place in command and took over the command Tiger call sign 007 as his own Tiger was already in workshops. Wittmann did not like the command variant, as it carried thirty fewer rounds and no coaxial machine gun.
10. Interview with the author, 2008.
11. It is commonly reported in accounts of the fighting in Normandy that the passage of high-velocity tank or anti-tank rounds could be seen like the wake of a torpedo in the tall wheat or barley, with tank crews even saying that they had been able to take evasive action.
12. All five Tigers were subsequently 'pulled' by Canadians or Poles in order to remove their tracks, so that the individual links could be used to up-armour Shermans against the hollow-charge *Panzerfaust* and *Panzershrek* rounds. During this process the original location and orientation was changed and 007's turret would have been left behind when pulled as shown in the photographs.
13. *Zeltbahnen* or tent quarters were heavy canvas sheets that could be used as groundsheets, worn as a poncho or, with two or more buttoned together, made into a shelter or tent. Each soldier carried a *Zeltbahn* plus a short pole and pegs.
14. The nucleus of the Polish Armoured Division had escaped from France in 1940 and alongside many British formations trained, re-equipped, reorganized and retrained for four years.
15. The Sherman was referred to as the 'Tommy Cooker' by the Germans and the 'Ronson' by the Allies because it lit 'first time and every time'. The reason is it was often said to be petrol-igniting, but diesel versions suffered equally badly from 'brewing'. The problem was not solved until wet ammunition stowage was introduced in the autumn of 1944.
16. The deployment of the 88mm guns of III Flak Corps in this case stands in contrast to their commander's reluctance to deploy assets forward in the anti-tank role earlier in the campaign. The generally longer fields of fire could be a factor, along with ammunition supply and practical experience of camouflage. *Sturmbannführer* Hubert Meyer wrote: 'Without doubt the 8.8cm Flak guns were an important support in anti-tank activities but only at long range were they able to fight tanks effectively without being knocked out quickly by them. Once spotted they were favourite targets for artillery and fighter-bombers.'
17. This is not the case. Point 111 is on the northern side of the ridge line.
18. The 85th Infantry Division was just arriving in Normandy, but as usual it was strung out on the route of march.
19. A similar change of tactics had led to the capture of the Tourmeauville bridge during Operation EPSOM.
20. *Standartenführer* Meyer states that the Canadians failed to Capture Point 195, but

Sturmbannführer Hubert Meyer observed in the *Hitlerjugend*'s history that 'The occasional contradictory reports and statements are probably based on the fact that Hill 195 has a rounded top approximately 1.5km wide.'

21. The South Alberta Regiment's history.
22. The 301st *Funklenk* Battalion had four companies, one of which was known to be under command of the 2nd Panzer Division. Presumably another of the companies was with either the *Leibstandarte* or the *Hohenstaufen*. They had thirty-two assault gun radio vehicles, which took control once the driver of the Borgward B4 had abandoned the vehicle within 100 yards of its target. Even though 146 Borgward B4s were available to the battalion, they made little impression on the fighting in Normandy.
23. War diary of the Grenadier Guards of Canada.

Chapter 9: Endgame in Normandy

1. Hubert Meyer mentions that *Obersturmführer* Mohnke and headquarters 26th *Panzergrenadiers* were responsible for elements of the division refitting in the rear area near the Seine.
2. Meyer, Kurt, *Grenadiers* (Fedorwicz, 1994).
3. Lieutenant General Simonds accepted that separating the infantry and tanks was contrary to tactical doctrine, but he wanted speed and armoured punch to break through to Falaise.
4. War diary of I/12th SS Panzer Regiment.
5. The Germans were using a flashless propellant, but the trade-off was that it tended to generate more smoke.
6. Hitler finally accepted that Normandy could not be held and approved the withdrawal on 16 August, by which time it was already well under way.
7. According to *Sturmmann* Bassenauer, a member of the crew, they knocked out three Shermans.
8. The Allies launched some 2,535 air sorties between Falaise and the Seine on 19 August.
9. *Sturmbannführer* Olböter took command of the *Kampfgruppe*.
10. Thanks to the difficulty of coordination, the division had troops in all three columns.
11. During an interview with Hubert Meyer, one of the authors carelessly referred to 'the destruction of the division'. An angry 80-year-old former SS *Obersturmführer* produced papers to prove to a chastened author that this was not the case!
12. Referring to I SS Panzer Corps' appearance in the Ardennes at the opening of the Battle of the Bulge.

The crew of a Panzer IV carry out repairs on the running gear of their tank.